

NOT-THE-TROUBLES : AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS OF STORIES OF QUOTIDIAN LIFE IN  
BELFAST

Karen Lane

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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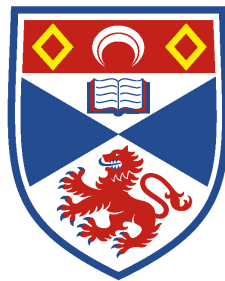
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# **Not-the-Troubles: An Anthropological Analysis of Stories of Quotidian Life in Belfast**

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**Karen Lane**



University of  
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of MPhil/PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews

28 April 2017

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### Social Anthropology Ethics Committee

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## **Abstract**

To understand the complexity of life in a city one needs to consider a spectrum of experience. Belfast has a history of conflict and division, particularly in relation to the Troubles, reflected in comprehensive academic studies of how this has affected, and continues to affect, the citizens. But this is a particular mode of representation, a vision of life echoed in fictional literature. People's quotidian lives can and do transcend the grand narratives of the Troubles that have come to dominate these discourses. Anthropology has traditionally accorded less epistemological weight to fleeting and superficial encounters with strangers, but this mode of sociality is a central feature of life in the city. The modern stranger navigates these relationships with relative ease. Communicating with others through narrative – personal stories about our lives – is fundamental to what it is to be human, putting storytelling at the heart of anthropological study. Engagements with strangers may be brief encounters or build into acquaintanceship, but these superficial relationships are not trivial. How we interact with strangers – our public presentation of the self to others through the personal stories we share – can give glimpses into the private lives of individuals. Listening to stories of quotidian life in Belfast demonstrates a range of people's existential dilemmas and joys that challenges Troubled representations of life in the city. The complexity, size and anonymity of the city means the anthropologist needs different ways of reaching people; this thesis is as much about exploring certain anthropological methodologies as it is about people and a place. Through methods of walking, performance, human-animal interactions, my body as a research subject, and using fictional literature as ethnographic data, I interrogate the close relationship between method, data and analysis, and of knowledge-production and knowledge-dissemination. I present quotidian narratives of Belfast's citizens that are Not-the-Troubles.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I must thank everyone who participated in the research in Belfast and in London. You all gave your time and your wisdom so generously and I am sorry that not every single story has made it into this dissertation, because every single story was fascinating. It is difficult to name particular people but I will. In Belfast my thanks to Paul Doran and Pádraig O'Tuama for their support and enabling access to Tenx9 storytellers, and to Gerry Bell for assiduously reading and commenting on every chapter (and the spinach pie). In London particular thanks to Tom McMillan for introducing me to 'the guys', to Mary Connolly for working the room on my behalf at the Irish Ambassador's reception, and to John Dunn for introducing me to the magic of being involved in a theatre production.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my sister  
Julie Gorton (1967-2012)

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## PROLOGUE

Imagine yourself suddenly set down, not on a tropical beach in the Trobriand Islands, but in Olympia Drive, Belfast. You're standing between two long rows of red-bricked terraces, 'kitchen houses' as they're known round here, where living rooms open directly onto the street and tiny backyards are surrounded by high walls. Behind you, the huge ugly backside of the North Stand glowers above the rooftops but all is quiet; no football fans stomping on the stands, no chants, no cheers, no groans of despair, no piercing referee's whistle at Windsor Park today. A neighbour nods in greeting: it's a start. Gazing down the street your eyes are drawn to verdant Divis Mountain, crow-fly close. But this is a city of borders and the unseen M1 whizzes the traffic down the middle of this place and there. The dog suddenly shakes and tinkling collar tags wake you from reverie. COME ON, she foot-stamps. Let's GO!

Imagine yourself suddenly set down, not on a tropical beach but outside the Titanic Museum, Belfast. You're sitting on one of the wooden benches that morse-code around the iceberg-shiny edifice. It's impressive, yet dwarfed by the huge yellow cranes of Harland and Wolff, reminding you of the city's industrial heritage and unionist domination. A slow panorama takes in the lough stretching out to open sea, rust-coloured containers stacked up in the docks, the New Lodge flats with an Irish tricolour fluttering on top, the Seamen's church spire, sun-glintoned glass of new offices, hotels and restaurants; all encircled by those ever-present hills. Your eyes are drawn to the sharp outline of Cave Hill: a taxi driver, a passing traveller and one other person (or was it two?) told you it was the inspiration for Jonathan Swift's man-mountain. Or it's Napoleon's nose. Satire and war. City of symbols. And oppositions.

Imagine yourself suddenly set down in Writers' Square, Belfast. It's Culture Night and the streets are swarming with people as they move in an uncoordinated flow, hither and thither, stopping and starting, children running, adults admonishing, young people laughing. They're off to galleries and recitals and the circus and the storytelling and oh, so many things to do. There's a waft of fried onions and as you look out across the hubbub, your eyes are drawn not to the gothic edifice of St Anne's Cathedral and its incongruously modern toothpick-pointy spire, but to four drag queens on its steps posing for photos snapped on phones, and you smile to yourself. What a city of juxtapositions.

Imagine. Suddenly! Unexpected drama in the hairdressers. Botanic Avenue, Belfast. Hairdresser's scissors and Indians and theatrics. You stare transfixed into the mirror and mumble anodyne replies. Alert. Offended. Educated. Disseminate! A city that challenges.

Imagine you're reading a novel: Belfast north and Belfast south, east and west and city centre. Immersed in a swirl of words with characters that yearn for the future, who are dragged back to the past. Park and Patterson, Carson and Caldwell. City written; shadows and surprises.

You're an ethnographer. Stepping out into this much-written-about city, you're looking for a different angle. Who will you meet? What stories will you hear? Where will they take you? What will you learn?

Come. I'll show you. Let's journey together.



There will always be someone there to say, 'tell me a story', and someone there to respond. Were this not so, we would no longer be fully human.

(Kearney 2002:156)

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the tasks he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.

(Goffman 1990:28)

Belfast, more than many other European cities, has been stereotyped to death.

(Dawe 2003:207)

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

To understand the complexity of life in a city one needs to consider a spectrum of experience. This dissertation considers how people living in conflicted places transcend narratives of that conflict, and I do so by studying the public presentation of the self to strangers (Goffman 1990) in a range of urban encounters, from a few minutes chatting on a street corner or half an hour with a hairdresser through to the beginnings of acquaintanceship, as repeated encounters build on one another.

The notion of anthropological fieldwork is deeply rooted in the method of participant observation, predicated on long-term engagement, to understand what lies beneath the surface, what Spradley refers to as ‘the hidden principles of another way of life’ (2016:4; see also DeWalt & DeWalt 2011). Although some anthropologists conduct short-term research (Pink and Morgan 2013), multi-sited fieldwork (Wulff 2001), or have a ‘virtual’ fieldsite such as social media (Miller et al. 2016), anthropology has traditionally accorded less epistemological weight to the fleeting and to superficial encounters with people. But these kinds of encounters are a *central feature* of life in the city. When we present ourselves to others – even in a few minutes on a street corner – we exchange stories about who we are and where we are (Kearney 2002). Depending on the nature of this storytelling, it can indicate what we find interesting or meaningful. Therefore, *if we were to pay critical attention to the fleeting and to surface presentation, what anthropological knowledge might we discover?*

My study is located in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where the politico-ethno-religious conflict, widely referred to as the Troubles<sup>1</sup> (1968-1998), has become a defining discursive feature of a country on an island whose troubled relationship with the rest of the British Isles goes back more than eight hundred years (Davies 1990). Although it is almost twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement brought relative peace and stability to the country, past conflict is yet prominently displayed

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<sup>1</sup> The Troubles is a widely understood term therefore no quotation marks.

in social and political life in the city, whether through wall murals of historical events, parades that celebrate past hurts and victories, or devolved government where former enemies share power. Parades reach a peak in the summer; a period when, in the city in particular, the atmosphere is one of 'violent potential' (O'Dowd and McKnight 2013:266), and rioting and serious violence still occasionally erupts. I argue that the Troubles – by which I mean the causes, the protagonists, and the aftermath including peace and reconciliation initiatives – have become the 'grand narratives' through which Belfast is articulated, a term I shall make use of and henceforth will be without quotation marks. However, *by studying the fleeting and the quotidian, we can discover to what extent people living in Belfast dwell in the interstices of these grand narratives such as to obviate their meanings and effect.* I do this primarily through the personal stories that people tell of themselves; I also consider how the city is represented in contemporary fiction. My thesis is that the superficial is not trivial and that contemporary quotidian stories of personal lives, garnered through fleeting urban encounters, demonstrate how some people in Belfast assert themselves against the grand narratives that feed into a stereotypical view of Belfast as 'Troubled'. People's stories of their ordinary and everyday lives, be they banal and mundane or poignant and profound, stories that were pushed to the narratorial margin, do nevertheless quietly take up centre stage in personal lives.

Much of past and current academic focus on Northern Ireland is on the conflict, its causes and its aftermath, and it is these 'findings' that often influence public policy (Donnan and McFarlane 1989, 1997; Bryan and Jarman 1997). It is not my intention to denigrate people's experience of the conflict, or academic understanding of it, but this is a particular mode, only, of representation of life in the city. Studying personal stories uses a vernacular discourse, including the rhythm of speech and the way people relate to each other, and this reveals another vision of contemporary Belfast. Here, people's existential dilemmas – what I call their small 't' troubles – *can* compete with and transcend capital 'T' Troubles. As Justin, one of the research participants says, 'just because I'm Northern Irish doesn't mean my story has to be about Catholics and Protestants'.

In my work, notwithstanding, I do not attempt to explore core selfhood or people's inner lifeworlds, even though Irving (2016) would suggest the absence of

the latter to be an anthropological failing, since it leaves out, as it were, half the story. If this is a failing in the dissertation, it is due to a desire to focus on external presentation rather than a denial of the importance, indeed enmeshment, of the internal and external self. I use the term 'lifeworld' here in a particular sense, as a person's subjective experience of the world, differentiating it from their 'life conditions', those material and immaterial things in a person's world (Kraus 2015:2). My key argument is that *how some people present their ordinary lives, what they choose as their surface manifestation of themselves, challenges representations of life in Belfast found in academic and fictional literature and in popular and news media*. I draw on the figure of the urban stranger (Simmel 1950, Harman 1988) with regard to whom these stories are told, whether that is to me as I wander the streets or to a room full of unknown people at a storytelling night. In doing so, I consider what function the stranger plays in personal storytelling in the city.

My findings are selective in that they relate to the people I met, and my ethnography does not make any claims to generalisation (Abu-Lughod 1991). For example, I did not work with people living at the many interfaces between predominantly-Catholic and predominantly-Protestant communities in Belfast, where the stories that people tell each other may or may not accord with the grand narratives. Nor do I consider the experience of migrants to Northern Ireland where their stories may or may not transcend the Troubles (*cf.* Hainsworth 1998; Kempny 2012; Doyle & McAreavey 2014; Lee 2014). Had I included people from these groups my thesis may have been different, depending on what those findings might have been. I also acknowledge that by declaring my interest in the ordinary and the everyday to people, what I refer to as 'Not-the-Troubles', does not invite, and may even discourage, stories of conflict or division. I justify this by reiterating that other academics have this well covered: there is a variety of discourses in quotidian Belfast and some may be more Troubles-dominated than others. Although I will give a brief overview of the background to the conflict and the current divisions within the city in order to provide context, the thrust of this dissertation is firmly, and unashamedly, on Not-the-Troubles as a recognition that, for many people, contemporary life in Belfast is more than its past.

My work sits within and contributes to a number of debates: anthropology of the city and of place; anthropology of storytelling, literature and performance; and, because my dog was sometimes my research assistant, anthrozoology. These will be outlined in due course. Although these topics are quite wide-ranging this is necessary to do justice to selfhood and the urban experience, since the city is a complex phenomenon, and even this raft of anthropological concerns can only address certain aspects of what it is to be a human being living in Belfast today.

In order to marshal ethnographic data and theoretical literature into the arguments I present, each chapter has a vertical structure, by which I mean each one addresses a different mode of storytelling, a different type of encounter, and majors on one of the theoretical debates, and I will give more detail on the structure of the dissertation later in this Introduction. However, these anthropological debates, such as on place or performance, are pertinent to more than one chapter. Therefore, I use the Conclusion as an opportunity to look at the data horizontally and thematically, and I expand on this at the end of the Introduction. Nevertheless, storytelling and 'Not-the-Troubles' are the key leitmotifs that weave through the dissertation as I bring together urban encounters with strangers and the narrative identities the strangers present to one another.

In the remainder of this Introduction, I will first give a brief background to the conflict in Northern Ireland to contextualise my focus on Not-the-Troubles; then I shall summarise the key anthropological debates that situate my research, followed by a brief overview of each chapter. Finally I will indicate the themes I will explore in the Conclusion.

## **The Conflict In Northern Ireland**

The conflict in Northern Ireland is a meta-conflict. That is, today there is conflict over what the conflict is about.

(Mitchell 2006:3)

The conflict in Northern Ireland has a long historical background. It is complex; the facts, analysis and language used are contested (Daly 2007), and it is outwith the

remit of this dissertation to discuss this fully. But because reminders of the past are very present in Belfast, for example, through murals and parades, and because contemporary divisions in particular are forged on past histories, a brief overview is necessary to situate, in their historical context, the non-Troubles stories that are the focus of my research.

The conflict is ethno-religious, political and ideological: it is between Catholic and Protestant; between nationalists who want the reunification of the island of Ireland and unionists who want to remain part of the United Kingdom; and it is between republicans and loyalists, traditionally associated with paramilitary groups that advocate violent means to achieve ideological ends. The dominant hegemonies, then, are Catholic nationalism with republicanism at the extreme and Protestant unionism with loyalism at the extreme, although the categories are more nuanced than this generalisation conveys and many people would not ally to any of these groups or may identify, say, with one particular religion without combining that with a political or ideological position. Despite almost two decades of relative peace in the country, there is still dissention over competing rights, therefore I use the term 'conflict' to refer to the contemporary situation as well as its historical meaning. As Coulter and Murray note, one needs 'to exercise a little caution before speaking of Northern Ireland as a place that exists "after the troubles"' (2008:21).

To understand the conflict one needs to appreciate the atavistic history of the island of Ireland, since each iteration of violence recalls previous historical hurts. For nationalists the problems date back to the twelfth century when Henry II of England invaded Ireland (Davies 1990). Initially, the country was nominally under English rule, as Irish chiefs were in possession of most of the country (Coohill 2005). However, in the fourteenth century the English tried to exert more control, the Irish fought back and the Anglo-Irish (those loyal to the English crown) retreated to an area around Dublin known as The Pale. This is viewed as the beginning of colonisation, which culminated in the fifteenth century when Henry VIII declared himself King of Ireland (Coohill 2005). The situation was exacerbated by the 'Plantation of Ulster' in the seventeenth century, when profitable land in the north east of Ireland was forcibly taken from Catholics deemed to be recalcitrant and given to Protestant settlers primarily from lowland Scotland (Coohill 2005). Discrimination

against Catholics led to violent uprisings against what was seen as British occupation, violently quelled by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, sedimenting him in Irish folk memory as ‘a butcher of Catholics’ (Coohill 2005:23). When Catholic King James II came to the English throne in 1685, he began to promote Catholics to prominent positions in the army, provincial government and judiciary in Ireland. Protestants there viewed him as a despot and appealed to the Dutch prince, William of Orange. He not only successfully invaded England, where he deposed James II and was crowned William III, but also, in 1690, fought and defeated the former King James at the Battle of the Boyne, near Drogheda. This heralded the beginning of the Protestant ascendancy in Northern Ireland (Hill 1984), and the victory is celebrated each year by unionists on the eleventh and twelfth of July (Wilson and Stapleton 2005), with bonfires and parades. The holiday is often referred to as ‘The Twelfth’.

Throughout the next three centuries, successive uprisings by Catholics were brutally quelled, one of the most notable being the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 (Coogan 2005), after which nearly all of the ringleaders were executed.<sup>2</sup> Easter remains ‘the most prominent and widespread commemoration for republicans’ (Jarman 1997:148). Following the Irish War of Independence (1919-22) the island was partitioned: the Irish Free State was established as a British Dominion, achieving full independence in 1949 (Coohill 2005); meanwhile the newly established Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom, now had a Protestant majority.

Ruane and Todd (1996) identify four themes underpinning the conflict in Northern Ireland: the dominance of Protestant economic and political power; a history of discrimination against Catholics in housing and employment; the social and economic problems experienced by the working-class (both Catholic and Protestant); and inequality between expressions of Irish and British culture. They summarise this as a conflict of religion (Catholic and Protestant) and ethnicity (Irish and British), with religion the most important difference. Other commentators, such as McGarry and O’Leary (1995), Shirlow and Murtagh (2006), and Jenkins (1986), see ethnicity as the primary issue, although Jenkins’ later reassessment was of ‘an ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> Two prominent ringleaders’ sentences were commuted to imprisonment: Countess Markievicz, because she was a woman, and Éamon de Valera, because he was Irish-American (Coogan 2005).

conflict with a religious dimension' (1997:121). Meanwhile, MacDonald (1986) argues that the causes of the conflict were basically colonial, and Smith and Chambers (1991) believe it all boils down to economic inequality. However, it is difficult to accept that any one analysis adequately explains the conflict; all must be taken into account.

Although there is no agreement on when the Troubles began, a commonly cited date is 5 October 1968, when a civil rights march in Londonderry ended in violent confrontation with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and lasted for three days. It became known as The Battle of the Bogside. While the organisers of the march, Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), was a peaceful, non-sectarian organisation, support for NICRA was very strong among nationalists, and the organisation was viewed by Protestants as 'the old Catholic enemy in new clothes' (Hewitt 1981:371). From the inception of the RUC in 1922, its employees were overwhelmingly Protestant and it was perceived by the Northern Irish government as 'a paramilitary police force that would play a direct role in the maintenance of the state and its unionist character' (Mulcahy 2013:7). Thus, the Battle of the Bogside was cast as a battle between Catholics and Protestants, and between (initially) peaceful civilians and armed policemen.

Violent protest spread to Belfast and on 15 August 1969 British troops were deployed to assist the RUC in containing the disorder. At the same time there was a split in the (Catholic) Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Provisional IRA was formed, quickly moving into the republican ascendancy. The Armed Struggle, as the military campaign against the British state was termed, became much more violent (English 2004). There was violent retaliation/provocation from (Protestant) loyalist paramilitaries, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The cycle of violence escalated over the next twenty-five years.

A ceasefire was called by most of the paramilitary groups in 1994 but quickly broke down. A second ceasefire in 1997 held, leading one year later to the Belfast Agreement, widely known as the Good Friday Agreement. This heralded what is now referred to as the post-conflict period and, although it has had a halting and chequered progress (Coulter and Murray 2008), the peace has held. In 2006, the St Andrews Agreement paved the way for what was once considered inconceivable:



First Minister Reverend Ian Paisley in government with Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness. Protestant Paisley, of the Democratic Unionist Party, was known for his rhetoric of 'No Popery' and 'No Surrender', meaning no to any compromise with Catholics or Irish nationalists. Meanwhile, Catholic McGuinness of Sinn Féin, the political party whose *raison d'être* is for a united Ireland, was open about his former senior role in the IRA. But Paisley and McGuinness not only governed together, they got on well (BBC News 2017a).

Residential segregation of Catholics and Protestants in Belfast is 'both the cause and the consequence of the province's history of turbulence' (Darby 1976:25) and this increased dramatically during the 1970s (Whyte 1990). Although ethno-religiously mixed areas have increased since the Good Friday Agreement, these are predominantly among the middle-classes in the south of the city, or in the gentrified city-centre area by the River Lagan waterfront, and during the same period inter-communal violence increased in north and west Belfast (Murtagh 2011). Ethno-religious divisions are made manifest by murals and parades (Jarman 1997). Whyte claims, nevertheless, that it is education that 'divides the population into two communities more precisely than any other [marker]' (Whyte 1986:230). For example, 93% of children attend either a Catholic or a Protestant school, with only 7% attending integrated schools (Hansson et al. 2013). There is even segregation in death: in Belfast City Cemetery there is an underground wall separating the Catholic and Protestant dead (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). From 1966 to 2006, there were 3,720 deaths attributed to the Troubles (McKittrick et al. 2007).

### ***So Why Is My Research Focus Not-the-Troubles?***

Three events led to my interest in, and subsequent focus on, this topic. I first noticed a lack of Troubles stories in everyday conversation during my Master's fieldwork in Belfast in 2007/08. My research then was on the link between story and place (Lane 2008, unpublished) and I expected to hear Troubles stories because many places in the city have overt references to it, such as murals or memorials. But the people I worked with then chose, in the main, to tell stories about other things. A second key event was when I met an anthropology PhD candidate in 2013 who hailed from Belfast but who had lived in Glasgow for several years. She told me that whenever

people asked her about her home town she regaled them with stories of the Troubles and of the sectarian divide, even though this was not her experience of the city: she had grown up since the ceasefires, had lived in an affluent middle-class suburb in South Belfast; she was Jewish and she went to Lagan College, an integrated and multi-faith school. This recognition of Troubled Belfast as a stereotype was further reinforced early on in my PhD fieldwork in 2014. When I told someone that I was interested in ordinary and everyday stories that were not related to the conflict, he quickly, and ironically, wisecracked: 'Well, that's the first two weeks sorted out. What will you do for the rest of the time?'

Malkki (1997) notes that anthropology's focus is most often on the mundane – the ordinariness and everydayness of people's lives – in contrast to journalism, which tends to sensationalise exceptional and unique circumstances. Journalistic output about Belfast, particularly for the consumption of an audience outwith Northern Ireland, has primarily focused on the sensational and unique circumstances of the Troubles (Butler 1995; Dixon 2008) and, of course, for those who were living in the most dangerous parts of the city, this became everyday life. But when newsworthy Belfast is only seen through this prism, it gives a very selective view of life in the city. Of course, there is a vast array of media stories in print, television, radio etc. that deals with non-conflict issues, but these are primarily for domestic consumption; the stories about Northern Ireland that make the news outwith the province concentrate on the grand narratives. For example, Butler cites two television programmes, made by Granada TV in 1969 and 1970, about the loyalist working class that depicted an unflattering portrait of 'bile and bitterness' and which UTV, the Ulster television company, refused to broadcast (1995:144). A focus on conflict is understandable with regard to reporting an on-going violent situation. But it is now almost twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed and news for a non-domestic audience still has, by and large, the conflict as an anchor point.

The news media played a significant role leading up to the ratification of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, promoting its adoption (Mac Ginty & Darby 2002). However, Rolston questions the media's ability to deal with the complexity and nuance of conflict reconciliation, particularly with regard to portrayals of 'ideal' victims (Rolston 2007:359). Meanwhile, Ferguson et al note the debate over who are

the 'true victims' of the conflict (2010:858). 'Victim' is a highly contested term among some people in Northern Ireland (*cf.* Lundy & McGovern 2001; Simpson 2009; McGrattan & Lehner 2012).

In early 2017 there was a crisis in the Stormont Government prompted by the Deputy First Minister's resignation, leading to a snap election. Although this was primarily in response to the claims of First Minister Arlene Foster's mismanagement of the Renewable Heating Incentive scheme (which aimed to promote renewable energy) (BBC News 2017b), the media commented mainly on the difficult relationship between the Deputy and First Minister, respectively Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness, a former commander in the IRA, and the Democratic Unionist Party's Arlene Foster, whose father was attacked by the IRA (Patel and Dunbar 2017). Once McGuinness stated his intention not to stand for re-election, his journey from paramilitary to politician became the top news story (McCann 2017), not the heating scheme that will cost British and Northern Irish tax-payers £1bn (Belfast Telegraph 2016c). Moreover, since the election campaign began, the political battleground of the Troubles' legacy has come to the fore (Devenport 2017).

Of course, journalism has a different function to anthropological research. Although there are some parallels with regard to reporting and understanding what is happening in the world, current affairs journalism is primarily focused on the immediate present, demonstrating that the legacy of the Troubles is still politically relevant. Anthropology has a different perspective, what Hannerz calls a 'medium-term history of the present' (2010:229), and ethnographic fieldwork is usually over a longer period, enabling a more nuanced analysis. Anthropologists working on Northern Ireland have made an important contribution to understanding 'the social fabric of the province and its most fundamental division', where studies have delved into the complexities that lie behind newspaper reports (Donnan and McFarlane 1989:14). For example, a common feature of life in Northern Ireland is the ability to detect (or assume) which ethno-religious group someone belongs to, a practice referred to as 'telling', which is used to *avoid* conflict by establishing the boundaries of acceptable interaction (Burton 1978, Wilson and Donnan 2006). But harking back to Malkki's earlier comment on anthropology's usual focus on the everyday and mundane, anthropological and sociological study in Northern Ireland, particularly in

Belfast, has focused to a large extent on the exceptional and unique circumstances of the Troubles. Karen Lysaght counsels that ‘while placing an emphasis upon everyday activities creates a more complex and nuanced picture of life in [Belfast as] a divided city, it is important not to create a false sense of “normality”’ (Lysaght 2006:128). However, I counter that too much emphasis on division creates an exaggerated picture of conflict.

This anthropological focus in Northern Ireland contrasts with anthropology on the Republic of Ireland, which, since the seminal study undertaken by Arensberg and Kimball in County Clare, has focused (at least initially) on kinship in rural communities (Arensberg 1937; Arensberg and Kimball 1968; see also Scheper-Hughes 1979; Curtin & Varley 1987). Early ethnographers in Ireland did little to research the effects of the 1919-22 war or ‘the political realities of the newly independent Irish state’ (Egan and Murphy 2015:135), and Ireland was portrayed as a dying society (Wilson & Donnan 2006). This began to change only with the approach of the twenty-first century, for example, with work on the rise and fall of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ (Allen 2000; Keohane and Kuhling 2014), or Irish cultural arts (Kneafsey 2003; Wulff 2007). But although some early work in Northern Ireland also had a rural setting (Harris 1972; Bufwack 1982), the tendency has been to concentrate on urban anthropology and an ethnographic model based on ‘tribal conflict’ (Wilson & Donnan 2006:22).

McQuaid criticises academics working on Northern Ireland for focusing on ‘the social pathology of division’ rather than, for example, why many people express a preference for integrated education and living in mixed areas (2012:76). Of course, the social problems experienced in Northern Ireland are not just those of sectarian division (Donnan and McFarlane 1997), and some academics have responded. For example, there are studies on boat ownership in the Northern Ireland fishing industry (Dilley 1989), on the impact of agricultural policy (Dawson 1997), coping with early pregnancy loss (Cecil 1997), the experiences of gay men and lesbians in Northern Ireland (Curtis 2013), and children’s work practices (Leonard 2015). But these are hugely outweighed by research on the conflict, its causes or aftermath. As an illustration of this, I undertook a search on Google Scholar using ‘Belfast’ as a search term, 2007 to 2017 as the date range, and excluding medical and geological

articles and citations; it identified that, of the first 100 results, 85% dealt with conflict, religious division or post-conflict reconciliation. Similar searches over the last few years, such as on JStor, have yielded similar results. Yet when I told people during my fieldwork that I was interested in the ordinary and everyday it was always met very positively and, although people may just have wanted to be kind to a researcher, I believe that their sentiments were genuinely expressed.

There are a number of reasons why a focus on the Troubles has come about. First and foremost, the conflict had a devastating effect on many lives and for some people continues to do so, as Pádraig Ó Tuama (2013:27) poignantly reminds us in this extract from his poem 'The Pedagogy of Conflict':

When I was a child,  
I learnt to count to five:  
one, two, three, four, five.  
But these days, I've been counting lives, so I count  
one life  
one life  
one life  
one life  
Because each time is the first time that that life has  
been taken.

In the book *Lost Lives*, David McKittrick and colleagues count the lives of the victims of the Troubles by presenting three thousand, seven hundred and twenty stories, each one attesting to the human cost of each life that was taken (McKittrick et al. 2007). Conflict and social division in Northern Ireland is a fact that cannot be ignored:

[It] was, and it remains, impossible to understand local rural and urban communities without understanding ethnicity, sectarianism, national identities, class, and the overall importance of history in everyday life.

(Wilson and Donnan 2006:27-28)

A second reason for a focus on the Troubles is that funding drives academic research priorities. In the late 1980s Donnan and McFarlane noted a trend of diminishing funds for any research 'which does not look at least partially policy relevant' (1989:1). Hastings Donnan now heads up an internationally-renowned research institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, named after Senator George J. Mitchell, who led the peace negotiations that resulted in the Good Friday Agreement. Naturally, this will attract academics researching the conflict. But market forces in the university sector have only hastened the trend to skew teaching and research in conflict studies. For example, Queen's University has run a successful summer school in Irish Studies for many years (aimed primarily but not exclusively at the American market), but to reinvigorate the programme, at a time when the anthropology department at Queen's was under threat of closure (Hughes 2016b), this now runs alongside a new summer school in conflict transformation.

Popular culture too is awash with Belfast as a dark and troubled city. A few examples (from many possibilities) include the films *A Prayer for the Dying* (1987), *Hunger* (2008) and *'71* (2014); novels such as *Cal* (MacLaverty 1998), *One by One in the Darkness* (Madden 1996) and *The Cold, Cold Ground* (McKinty 2012); and in the theatre, Christina Reid's *Joyriders* (1987), Marie Jones's *A Night in November* (2000), Gary Mitchell's *Remnants of Fear* (2009), and Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012): all span the Troubles and their legacy.

Artists, academics, politicians and journalists all have an understandable duty to focus their attention on the causes and effects of the conflict. However, positioning my work within the academic canon on Northern Ireland, I contend that, while conflict and reconciliation studies are important they are being well researched by others, and that this focus on Belfast's Troubles and religious division is not necessarily the daily lived experience of people in the city: it will be for some but not everyone, and it is this latter group whose everyday stories dwell on the narratorial margin – as portrayed by the media and academic 'industries'. I also contend that we can access a different kind of anthropological knowledge through a focus on surface presentation and superficial encounters – and what, paradoxically, these reveal of the depths of many people's everyday lives and sense of self. My explicit intention, therefore, is *to disinter the mundane in Belfast and to put it centre-*

*stage*. As playwright Darragh Carville said, in an interview with Henry McDonald: the ‘balaclava drama’ is not redundant; it ‘would be wrong to repress what happened in the past and pretend it never existed, but there is room for other stories’ (McDonald 2009).<sup>3</sup>

### **A Note On Terminology**

Language in Northern Ireland is often highly politicised, leading Butler to suggest that ‘codes of public communication [are] not at all neutral’ (1995:3). For example, republicans will not call the country by its official name of ‘Northern Ireland’ but instead speak of ‘the North’, since this indicates their ideological position of working towards a united Ireland. The city of Londonderry is also a contested term with many nationalists (and others) referring to it as ‘Derry’, its original name, rather than ‘Londonderry’ as it was renamed in 1613 during the Plantation of Ulster. (Four hundred years later, in 2013, when it was the UK’s City of Culture, it was referred to officially as Derry/Londonderry, and in the vernacular as Stroke City). In this dissertation I use local terms when I write in the voice of others, for example verbatim extracts, and official names when I use my authorial voice, unless I indicate otherwise. However, there are some terms in common parlance, such as the Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement (the official title is the Belfast Agreement) and I have adopted these. When writing about the two major religious groups, I have capitalised Catholic and Protestant, however for the political and ideological affiliations of nationalism/unionism and republicanism/loyalism these are in lower case – capitalisation used only when it refers to an official group, for example the political party Ulster Unionists.

### **Key Anthropological Debates To Situate The Thesis**

There are a number of anthropological debates within which my work is situated: these are outlined briefly below to give the reader a flavour of the theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> Online therefore no page number.

grounds on which my work stands. Namely: urbanism, place, storytelling, performance, emotion and sense, and anthrozoology. These do not, at this stage, constitute an argument. As discussed before, many of the themes are pertinent to more than one chapter; this is the main reason that there is a (false) separation at this stage between the literature and the content of each chapter.

### ***Urban Anthropology and the Nature of Urban Encounters***

In urban studies the city is analysed through different tropes: for example, as an Aristotelian *polis*, as a living organism, as a Marxist economic superstructure, or as driven by Weberian institutions that distribute resources. There are positive images of the city as cosmopolitan and multi-cultural, as against negative ones of corruption and chaos (Bridge and Watson 2003). There are contested, postmodern or traditional cities (Low 2005), cities as sites of personal freedom (Park and Burgess 1967), and cities of consumption and tourism (Sennett 1990). In Mumford's classic description, the city is a thriving, positive, creative place: 'a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theatre of social action' (Mumford, 2003:94). Urban studies can be classified into two meta-narratives: cities as sites of 'coercion, violence and inequality' versus cities as 'engines of new forms of capital accumulation' (O'Dowd and Komarova 2013:527).

Anthropology was a late arrival to urban studies, previously the purview of sociologists who studied the city as a complex whole, and of geographers where the focus is as much on physical space as it is on the activities that go on within it. Hannerz notes that it was not until the 1960s that anthropologists began to study urban problems, such as 'ethnicity' and 'poverty' (1980:1), and he contends that these were examples of anthropologists working *in* cities rather than evidence of a cohesive discipline of urban anthropology. With anthropology's traditional focus being on the 'exotic and unfamiliar' (Amit 2000:4), urban ethnographers were drawn to study the exotic other in cities (Fox 1977), such as rural migrants living in city slums and shanty towns, Hannerz' work on a black ghetto in Washington DC (Hannerz 2004 [1969]), or studies on cities in 'exotic' places, such as Africa (Gutkind 1968). Two disciplinary positions began to emerge within urban anthropology: those who argued that it was a study *of* the city, where 'the city [is] a totality that should



be studied’ as distinct from those who carried out anthropological research *in* the city, where the focus was on specific people or places or social practices (Pardo and Prato 2016:7-8). My work falls into the second category.

The 1980s saw a rapid increase in urban anthropological research, and this was reflected in Northern Ireland as discussed earlier (Wilson & Donnan 2006), a trend that has continued. Belfast has most frequently been analysed as a divided city, in terms of both conflict and post-conflict (*cf.* Jenkins 1983; Cairns 1987; Butler 1995; Aretxaga 1997; Bollens 1999; Bryan 2000; Jarman and O’Halloran 2001; Roche 2007; Calame and Charlesworth 2009; Mulcahy 2013; Hayward and Komarova 2014; Halliday and Ferguson 2015; Hayes and Nagle 2016; Arar 2017). There are some studies that move away from ethnic division as a fundamental element of analysis, for example, Nagle’s (2013) work on cross-community social movements, Kempny (2010) on Polish migrants’ identity in Northern Ireland, or William Neill *et al* (2014b) on the city’s association with RMS *Titanic*, the ship that was built in Belfast but sank on her maiden voyage in 1912. Of course, with the ‘publishing delay’ that still besets the academy, it may be that there is more non-Troubles research being carried out than is evident here. However, the main academic focus even now appears to be on conflict and division. Therefore, my work in Belfast sits within the Northern Irish urban anthropological tradition only in so far as where my work is placed, rather than the tropes that I call on.

According to a number of commentators, any city is a conglomeration of strangers (*cf.* Meyer 1951; Lofland 1973; Sennett 1977). In early studies the figure of the stranger is understood as an outsider, spatially and socially, a wanderer who is both proximate and distant (Simmel 1950 [1908]), a marginal person (Park 1928), someone who tries to be accepted or tolerated (Schuetz 1944), yet a baffling figure that is difficult to place (R. Bauman 1990). In these analyses the stranger is someone who is different (Alexander 2004), someone who is not-us and with whom we maintain relations at a distance, through glances and ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman 1963:84). However, I draw on a different and specific configuration, that of the modern stranger (Harman 1988), whereby encounters with strangers in the contemporary city are the rule not the exception (McWeeny 2016), and we learn to negotiate these relationships with relative ease. In the city, strangers share the

commonality of an immediate present of time and space (Meyer 1951). However, I do draw on Simmel (1950) and Scheutz (1944) with regard to the ease of sharing confidences with strangers, where the fleeting nature of the relationship can lead to intimacies being shared, giving 'glimpses of the private lives of individuals' (Davis 1959:160).

For Diken (1998), there are degrees of strangeness and I apply this concept to the nature of the encounters I had with people in Belfast. Some I met for only five or ten minutes and I never saw them again; others I would see regularly but infrequently, walking for several hours in the hills but only meeting once a month; with my neighbours, I had short and frequent interactions; while at the monthly storytelling night that I attended, people would share quite personal stories with a room full of people they had never met before.

### ***The Anthropology of Place***

Edward Casey (1996; 2000) asserts that place is everywhere, we are immersed in it: place is not just where things are but where things happen and, since place exists through time, it is a shifting concept, not a static one. Because we invest place with significance, the sense that we make of place is closely associated with the sense we make of ourselves (Feld and Basso 1996; Basso 1996), so by listening to people's stories about place we can come to understand something of who they are. However, it is not my intention to reify this concept. Rapport (2003, 2013) argues that place is over-determined, we are individuals before, beside and beyond categorisations such as where we are from, and he goes so far as to declare that the 'socio-cultural is the stolen essence of the personal' (2008:331). Meanwhile, Augé (1995) believes that if place is everywhere then it becomes meaningless as an analytical category.

However, Escobar (2001) defends the place of place by arguing that, despite academic deconstruction, where placelessness has come to be seen as a fundamental element of the modern condition, 'place continues to be important in the lives of many people' (2001:140). Belfast as a place in the lives of people is much written about, whether that is on murals (Jarman 1997), memorials (Viggiani 2014), residential segregation (Doherty and Poole 1997) or the reimagining of the post-

conflict city (Hocking 2015; Neill et al 2014). Meanwhile Donnan (2005) asserts that people's personal stories and the places they relate to are bound together.

My work sits within this discourse by investigating how some people in Belfast relate to the city as a non-Troubled place. I do this through the stories they tell about places in the city. One method to investigate this – a method I shall make much use of – is through walking (Vergunst 2010) and the notion of the *flâneur* (Benjamin 1983; Elkin 2016), either to meet people randomly or to walk purposefully to and through places as people tell me their stories.

### ***Anthropology of Storytelling***

Many commentators see narrative as fundamental to being human. For example, for Barthes it is 'present in every age, in every place, in every society... [it is] international, transhistorical, transcultural: *it is simply there, like life itself*' (1993:251-252, my emphasis). Kearney states that without stories 'we would no longer be fully human' (2006:156) and Gottlieb refers to the human species as '*homo narrans*' (2016:99). Meanwhile, Jackson (2006) asserts that there is a narrative imperative, suggesting a human compulsion to tell stories. This puts storytelling at the heart of anthropology. But first I want to consider the terms 'narrative' and 'story'.

Narrative can be conceived as the telling (in whatever medium, though especially through language) of a series of temporal events so that a meaningful sequence is portrayed – the story or plot of the narrative.

(Kerby 1991:39)

Kerby uses the term 'narrative' here as though it is a verb, the act of telling, and 'story' as a noun, the content of what is told. However, the terms 'narrative' and 'story' seem to be used interchangeably in the literature, and they are sometimes described as synonyms (Oxford English Dictionary 2017b). In general, I will use narrative when discussing the form theoretically and (more commonly) use story and storytelling as ethnographic terms; when quoting others, I follow their language use.

A human life is full of events 'that can ultimately be told as a story' (Arendt 1959:72); but it is the story itself that puts these events together sequentially, so

that they have a beginning, a middle and an end (Kermode 2000). There is an existential disorderliness to life, where unconnected events occur simultaneously but, by linking together only those events or people or facts that are relative to the plot, stories corral this disorder (Carr 1991), which in turn gives us a sense of agency over our lives (Jackson 2006). Stories enable us to make meaning (Kearney 2002) and, by communicating them we transform our private world into a public one (Benjamin 2007; Arendt 1959) whereby other people can make meaning from our stories too (Jackson 1989). Communicating stories is not only done verbally or in writing (Ryan 2004), since it can be through images (Sluka 1996), sounds (Bjerstedt 2014), and movement such as dance (Foster 1998) or directing a visitor on a journey through a museum (Alexander 2014). Finally, stories put the infinity of time onto a human scale (Rapport & Overing 2007), whether a day, a year or a lifetime. My research into storytelling falls into three categories: the oral stories that people tell of their own lives; fictional literature about Belfast; and the use of storied techniques when disseminating my own work.

Finnegan notes that anyone can be a storyteller, as it requires no special training (1967). However the 'written and oral literature of Ireland is one of the richest sources in the world' (Ó Duilearga 1942:32), not only in the form of the Irish *seanchaí*<sup>4</sup> (storyteller) who wandered from house to house telling stories (Zimmerman 2001), but also in people's everyday lives today (Cashman 2011). This makes it a particularly useful cultural-symbolic form of communication with which to study people's narrative identity (Kearney 2002).

Personal stories are an expression of who we are, even if that is a performance, an intentional who-we-want-others-to-think-we-are. Ochs and Capps (2001) note there is a difference between telling a story *to* someone and telling a story *with* someone. I consider how this applies to the stories people tell to strangers, for example, stories on the street corner (telling with) or those told at a public storytelling night (telling to), and I place this in the context of Belfast, a city where stories of the past are painted on the walls and recreated through parading (Jarman 1997). I also consider the role of storytelling in nurturing a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> This is the Irish Gaelic spelling, pronounced *shan-a-key*. See Chapter Three.

belonging, particularly in relation to *communitas* (V. Turner 1995; E. Turner 2012) – the spontaneous sense of togetherness that can emerge unbidden, and the extent to which the notion of witnessing (Taussig 2011; Weiglhofer 2014) plays a role.

Narrative studies have been particularly apposite for anthropology since the ‘literary turn’ of the 1980s (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Poyatos 1988a), not only with regard to the role that literature plays in societies but also the literary nature of anthropological writing (Rapport 2012a). Eduardo Archetti (1994) calls for anthropologists to use a variety of texts as ethnographic data. Although Winner (1988) believed this should be in addition to, not a substitute for, fieldwork – such as the resonances that Rapport (1994) identified between his fieldwork in the north of England and the literary works of E. M. Forster – other academics have taken literature itself as their fieldsite, as with Talal Asad’s (1990) analysis of Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, or have studied novelists’ writing of fiction (Wulff 2015), or the act of reading fiction (Reed 2011). As De Angelis notes, breaching boundaries between the two disciplines of literature and anthropology leads to ‘creativity and new possibilities of understanding’ (2002:3). Taking my cue from these authors, I explore fictional literature about Belfast to consider to what extent depictions of life in the city accords with the lives of the amateur storytellers I worked with in 2014.

Turning now to literary anthropology in relation to anthropologists’ writing, it was Clifford Geertz (1988) who first identified the literary tropes to be found in ethnographies and this heralded a self-reflexive period for anthropology, looking at ethnographic writing style not only in terms of narrative structure but also more experimentally, such as auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997) or ethnographic novels (Price & Price 1995). Anthropologists had written novels based on their ethnographic fieldwork before this literary turn (*cf.* Hurston 2007 [1937]; Bowen 1964 [1954]), but it was seen as two distinctively different genres, to the extent that Laura Bohannon used the pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen to distinguish her fictional work from her anthropological work. In a review of Bowen’s novel, *Return to Laughter*, written shortly after the book’s publication, anthropologist Brenda Zara Seligman wrote that although she enjoyed the book and found the description of the African tribe ‘rings true’, she implicitly questioned this novelist/anthropologist

divide, and by implication *Bohannan's* anthropological credentials: fieldwork method 'should be scientific' and this had clearly not been achieved because of Bowen/Bohannan's obvious level of participation in the lives of the tribe (Seligman 1954:145).

However, the literary turn brought about a change in attitude, not only towards the anthropological value of the ethnographic novel (Richardson 1996; Tallman 2002) but also of the value of scholarly ethnographic writing in a more accessible style (MacClancy and McDonough 1996), what Gottlieb calls 'the anthropologist as storyteller' (Gottlieb 2016:93), and of the relationship between ways of knowing and ways of writing (Zenker and Kumoll 2010). Attention was turned to how the underlying values of the anthropologist and the academy were reflected in writing, such as with feminism (Behar and Gordon 1995) or colonialism (Stocking 1991). How anthropologists write and the blurring of boundaries between genres continues to be of interest (*cf.* Richardson 1993; Stoller 2007b; Narayan 2016; Wulff 2016). In this dissertation I intentionally use different writing styles, as I explain in the section outlining the structure of my work, and in the Conclusion, I will analyse the epistemological and aesthetic relationship between data and writing in more detail.

Hydén (2013) asserts that all storytelling is embodied, cognitive and situational, not only for the storyteller but also the listener, and it will often draw upon or evoke emotions in both participants: the storyteller and the story-hearer. However, I have separated out the anthropologies of storytelling, of performance and of the senses only for the purpose of marshalling the literature, recognising these categories to be intra-disciplinary constructs.

### ***Anthropology of Performance***

I approach performance from two perspectives: how and where people perform their stories, and the place of performance in disseminating anthropological knowledge. According to Goffman (1990), all our interactions with people are performative since we want those we interact with to take us seriously, and to believe in the impression we are creating. He maintains this is particularly true if we intend to mislead, that is to create a better or worse impression than we believe

ourselves, such as by putting on our 'party faces, funeral faces [or] institutional faces' (Goffman 1963:28). Thus, when I pass the time of day with someone on a street corner and they share a story with me, they wish me to take them and their story at face value, figuratively and metaphorically. This works both ways, for I too am performing, as an interlocutor, as an anthropologist (Irving and Reed 2010).

Goffman refers to these performances as masks, noting that they are structured like scenes in a play, for example, in 'the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies... because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing' (1990:28). Victor Turner too saw a strong correlation between theatrical performance and everyday life, noting that 'social drama' constantly emerges and erupts from the 'the fairly even surfaces of social life' (1982:9): periods of heightened physical, physiological and emotional activity from which one can make meaning. Turner makes a direct comparison to Aristotle's analysis of theatrical form and with artistic theatre performances in the West, which present an exaggeration of social life, and he believes that performance is an essential part of experience (Turner 1982, 1986). Meanwhile, for Richard Bauman (1975), performance is situated behaviour as it is rendered meaningful relevant to the physical, temporal and emotional context in which it is played out; the intensity and flow of a performance (Schechner and Appel 1990) adding depth of meaning.

I call on the work of a number of theatre practitioners (Hagen and Frankel 1973; Benedetti 1981; Hinckley 2008; Chekhov 2002; Pickering 2005; Auslander 2008; Spatz 2015) to consider how people perform their stories and the meaning that we can derive from this. Situating these stories in Belfast, I also consider how the performance of the grand narrative of the Troubles is played out in the city, such as with murals and parades (Sluka 1996; Bryan 2015), and demonstrate how the performance of quotidian stories is one way to compete with them.

Performance can also be a tool for scholarly engagement (Denzin 2003; Hamera 2011), such as Victor Turner's students reenacting ethnography (1982; 1988), or turning scholarly articles into a play (discussed in Chapter Five), and I explore performance as a way of knowing and a mode of dissemination in my own work.

### ***Anthropology of the Emotions and the Senses***

Emotions and the senses represent a huge area of study in anthropology but I explore one very specific aspect in my dissertation, and my review of the literature is therefore limited. Sarah Pink (2009) argues that analysis is not only cognitive but involves all of our corporeality, and she urges ethnographers to be more explicit about how fieldwork is experienced and to use this as a way of knowing. The body can only know itself 'and no other can know it in the same way' (Rapport & Overing 2007:39), and so Downey asks 'how *does* the body come to "know"?' (2007:223, my emphasis). For Gottlieb (2016), the fieldwork experience can be an emotional cauldron for the anthropologist and, when we are faced with practices or beliefs that we do not personally agree with, this can lead to emotional dissonance (Hochschild 2003): a tussle between what the anthropologist feels, what the anthropologist feels they should feel, and what he or she expresses. Jackson (2010) refers to this as fieldwork-boundary disruption.

Stoller (1997) believes we should tack between sensory and cognitive modes the better to analyse our findings. Thus, I consider what insights can be gleaned from the sensory and emotional knowledge I gained through *my own body*, not only during one specific encounter while on fieldwork but also when I used performance as a means of dissemination. I do not address the emotions or the senses as a cultural phenomenon (Howes 1991; Lutz 2007) nor do I specifically address the emotional inner life of the research participants I worked with, other than as a surface manifestation of their storytelling. This is purely for reasons of academic constraint imposed by the dissertation length and my desire to focus my work on the other aspects I have outlined in this Introduction.

### ***Anthrozoology***

Before mentioning literature on anthrozoology, a short explanation of why this is necessary is required, since it seems a strange bedfellow with all that has gone before. I took my dog with me on fieldwork. The decision to do this was purely practical. However, just before I went into the field, I discovered that Torridon (then a puppy) enabled me to make connections with people more easily. Whilst walking down Market Street in St Andrews one day, Torridon noticed an elderly woman in



front of us and she pushed her snout into the woman's leg. After the woman had made a fuss of the dog, she told me about her own dog who had died many years ago, and then spent the next half an hour talking to me about her family and her recent widowhood. Exactly the kind of stories I hoped to collect in Belfast. In that moment, Torridon's future role as a research assistant was born, and thus my work also engages with some of the literature on the emergent sub-discipline of anthrozoology.

There is no agreement among academics on whether we should use the term 'anthrozoology' (Hurn 2010), 'multispecies ethnography' (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), or 'human-animal studies' (de Mello 2012). This is more than just an exercise in semantics, as these terms indicate to practitioners and their supporters where the emphasis of study lies – be that anthropocentric, zoocentric or some kind of level playing field. However, all take as their primary focus the *interactions between* humans and non-human animals (de Mello 2012). Hurn (2010) prefers the term anthrozoology, as she sees the role of *anthropological* enquiry on the interactions between humans and other animals as one of the diverse manifestations of what it is to be human.

Many commentators note that dogs encourage social interaction (*cf* Messent 1983; Wood J. et al. 2007; Hart et al. 1987), and also the importance of eye contact between humans and dogs (*cf* Sanders 2003; Haraway 2008; Horowitz 2009). Horowitz goes so far as to suggest that dogs are good anthropologists because they pay close attention to human behaviour; 'they notice what is typical, and what is different' (2009:163) and they do this primarily through their sense of smell, which is so sensitive as to detect cancer and other diseases in humans (Willis et al. 2004; Moser and McCulloch 2010; Browne et al. 2006). Meanwhile, Hurn (2012) and de Waal (2008) suggest that animals can empathize with members of other species.

Drawing on these authors, I seek to understand *how* my dog worked as my research assistant and through this I touch tangentially on a number of other debates: cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1990; Beck 2002; Rapport 2007; Rapport 2012a; Wardle 2010) and cosmopolitan animals (Jalais 2008; Saito 2011); actor-network theory (Latour 1999, Law 1999, Munro 2009); and creative ambiguity (Klieman 1999; Gordon 2010).

## Structure And Style Of The Dissertation

My intentions here are to showcase non-Troubled stories, to write descriptively about Belfast to give the reader a sense of place, and to demonstrate how my research contributes to anthropological knowledge. This leads to a tension between breadth and depth of data and argument and I will comment on this before outlining the content of each chapter.

The reason for many stories is because 'one story is not enough to describe a city with many voices. Rather it is established through an abundance of micronarratives' (Schmieder 2012:2). Eriksen identifies that anthropology has much discussion and debate about the role of narrative in our lives 'but we rarely get on with actually telling stories' (2006:36), although Maggio (2014) disagrees, arguing that anthropologists always tell stories but rarely acknowledge them as such. My desire for many stories is also connected to my *raison d'être* of Not-the-Troubles. I argue that contemporary academic focus is still on (post) conflict and division; the breadth of stories is an attempt to redress the balance. The Troubles are not excised from my work, since this would be to fall prey to the kind of bias that I accuse other academics of allowing; the Troubles are just not given primacy of place. Where they have arisen in the stories that people told me, they are reflected, such as Sam's interest in conflict architecture in Chapter Four, and I write about Troubles' novels in Chapter Six to demonstrate to what extent fiction writing is changing.

My decision to write descriptively of Belfast is because 'place' in the city is closely associated with conflict and division, as already explored in this Introduction. The stories I represent here, by and large, give a different, non-Troubled sense of place. However, these descriptions are not in all of the chapters, since the nature of the data in Chapters Five and Six did not lend themselves to city description. I hope that a reader who knows Belfast can recognise it from these descriptions and a reader who does not can imagine the city more easily.

I use images in some of the chapters. First, they act as documentation that enhances or explains the text (Berger 2008). Second, they are sometimes used as a form of elicitation, whereby they prompt questions or emotions or tell a story (Barthes 2000; Berger and Mohr 1995). Finally, I comment on one photograph in particular to contemplate on temporality and symbolism in Belfast.

The dissertation has two closely-related concepts: modes of storytelling and the methods I use in my fieldwork. There are a number of reasons for using storytelling as a vehicle. First, not only is it a fundamental way that we relate to each other and make sense of our lives, it is also in keeping with a local cultural-symbolic form in Northern Ireland, which has a long history of storytelling. Thus, I analyse stories told on street corners, stories told on location, those told at a public storytelling night, and during a hairdressing appointment, while the penultimate chapter considers the stories told in fictional novels.

Second, to say to someone 'Tell me your stories' seems to be less threatening than 'Tell me your life-history' or 'Tell me about yourself'. This may be because the word 'story', by and large, has positive connotations (although I acknowledge they can be challenging or threatening depending on content and delivery); it is as if you are saying to someone 'Your life is so interesting that it's good enough to be a story that I will enjoy'. Stories are intended to be shared, a gift from the storyteller to the story-hearer, whereas asking for the details of someone's life could be seen as intrusive, a one-way street where the other person divulges facts for the consumption of the researcher. This polarised dichotomy is intentional to illustrate the point, since a skilled researcher will, over time, gain the trust of their research participants and may well be able to ask, 'Tell me about yourself'. But in a city, where many encounters are with strangers and the storied form is how we relate to one another, 'tell me your story' is a fast-track to data-gathering.

In addition to this, the data I derive are related to how I approach the field methodologically. How I am, who I meet and how they present themselves will give onto the data, since the human world looks a certain way depending on how you approach it, on your perspective, and on the types of encounters you have with people – such as a short, never-repeated chat with a stranger on a street corner, as against spending several hours with someone you have known for many years, or against reading a novel by a writer you have never met. Under a general umbrella of participant observation, my methods include: walking the dog; using my own body as a research tool; and drawing on fictional literature as ethnographic data. The complexity, size and anonymity of the city, as opposed to the smaller size of a village, means you have to find different ways of reaching people. More methods are

therefore better than one. For this reason there is no separate chapter on method: my methods are woven into the relevant chapters just as, in the field, method and data were woven together.

There is also no separate literature chapter. It is intellectually important for me that the ethnography drives the argument: the stories come first, what they might mean falls out of this. Therefore, although this Introduction has given an overview of certain disciplinary debates, they are explored in more depth in conjunction with the data in the relevant chapter.

My writing style changes register throughout the chapters, oscillating between storied dialogue, description and academic argument, and from first person narrator (not always myself) to third person commentator. Although the focus is on other people and my 'empirical observations gathered through specific methods and processed with theory' in order to 'appeal to readers' imaginations with colorful stories' (Narayan 2012:2) – it is also my story of my fieldwork experiences: a 'narrative of narratives' as it were (Werbner 1991:15). As Wulff (2016) notes, there are different kinds of anthropological writing and my kind is to use stylistic differences intentionally, not only to change the register from descriptive to academic story but also as a way to render different kinds of truthful accounts. We communicate with and understand each other through sharing stories and, when we do so, we make meaning from the story itself; it has its own inherent truth. By presenting people's stories in their first person narrative voice, the reader is able to engage directly with the story to decipher their own meaning. This may be different to the meanings I derive from my analysis, which will be influenced by the tropes I use or which academic's work I illustrate them with. Sometimes I come up with an explicitly different truth to the one that the research subject may have articulated. I examine these devices in more detail in the Conclusion.

### ***Ethnographic Chapters***

Chapter Two, 'Lovely Day for a Dander: Stories on the Street Corner', introduces the reader to Belfast, to some of the people I met and the stories they told me, through the walks I took in the city and its environs with my dog, Torridon. In the process, I argue that Torridon works as my research assistant by increasing my encounters with

random strangers and eliciting stories that would otherwise not be told. The chapter explores the concept of the modern stranger as a fundamental element of contemporary urban life. However, the main thrust of the chapter is methodological, as I seek to understand *how* Torridon works as a research assistant.

Chapter Three, 'Ten By Nine: Personal Storytelling in Public', examines the fundamental role of narrative in our lives, as a means to communicate who we are and what is important to us, by considering the true and personal stories told at 'Ten By Nine' (Tenx9), a popular public storytelling night in Belfast. Here, the *communitas* that exists between storytellers and audience opens up a privileged space for people to share their everyday lives. In so doing, it enables people to re-narrate a story of Belfast that challenges the hegemony of the grand narratives and opens up a privileged space to share one's small 't' troubles.

Chapter Four, 'Putting 'Place' in its Place: Storytelling on Location' brings together stories and the city by exploring the method I call storytelling-on-location. In doing so, it allows for more descriptions of Belfast and introduces the reader to some of the history of the city, as I investigate the symbolism that people imbue in place. I argue that symbolic meaning associated with place is overdetermined in Belfast by the hegemonic narratives of a divided and conflicted city.

Chapter Five, 'Josie, the Mirror and Me: Embodied Storytelling', explores the performative aspects of storytelling both as ethnographic fact and as a means of academic dissemination. I assert that in a city where performative storytelling abounds in the built environment, and in social and political life, theatrical storytelling is one way to compete with these grand narratives. As a researcher and *co-actor* in this encounter with a hairdresser, I explore the in-the-moment sensory knowledge I gained. I also consider how best to disseminate anthropological knowledge through writing and performance.

Chapter Six, 'Stereotypically Belfast? Fictional Representations of the City', is the last ethnographic chapter and marks a shift in both fieldsite and method as I move away from the physical city of Belfast to how it is represented in fiction. I compare this with representations of city life in the preceding chapters, as presented by research participants. There is a shift in focus too, since I discuss three Troubles' novels in some detail in order to locate the importance of Troubles literature during

and after the conflict. This enables me to demonstrate a trajectory that sees published fiction transitioning away from Troubles narratives.

### ***Addressing Data And Debate Thematically***

As I have already indicated, much of the theoretical literature is pertinent to more than one chapter. Therefore, in the Conclusion I reconsider the data I have presented using a different thematic structure. First I consider my epistemological contribution; what I have learned from the data and how have I addressed this conceptually; what shortcomings there are to the choices I have made; and I explore how methods, findings and analysis are closely interwoven. Second I review the dissertation aesthetically with regard to how I have chosen to represent that data. As Bruner notes, 'Every ethnographer must understand the distinction between the sociocultural realities he observes in the field and his genuine efforts to represent such realities in an ethnographic account' (1984:8). I explore how effective (or not) my genuine efforts to represent have been. Finally, I consider what this dissertation contributes to urban anthropology in Northern Ireland and how the theoretical framework I have used or the methods I employ could be relevant elsewhere.

### **Surfaces And Stories**

It is my contention that frequent fleeting and short-term encounters with strangers constitute contemporary urban life and that we learn to navigate these relationships with relative ease. When we present ourselves to others for the first time, or in early acquaintanceship, we project an image that we generally want others to believe, and the conversations that we have with people can turn quickly into personal stories of everyday lives. In Belfast, the encounters I had with people revealed an everydayness that was not dominated by the Troubles and on-going post-conflict divisions. I am not suggesting that these issues are unimportant to people but that in navigating day-to-day life, they are not to the fore. I do accept that Belfast is represented as a Troubled or post-conflict city in academic and fictional literature, and in news media for an international audience, but I argue that these hegemonic grand narratives distort representations of the lives of some people in the city whose stories have dwelt on the narratorial margin. By paying attention to the surface manifestations that people present to others, to the stories they tell, a different

representation of life in the city is revealed, one that is now making itself heard in published fiction too.

In his book *Road Markings* (2012), anthropologist Michael Jackson reminisces about a day spent wandering around San Francisco and he recalls snippets of overheard conversations:

In a grocery store at Nob Hill I overheard a woman telling her companion that her brother had committed suicide seventeen years ago to the day. 'I turned the corner this summer,' she said, 'which makes me think I'm now ready to write a book about it.' On a street corner at Russian Hill, I passed a woman pushing a friend in a wheelchair. The woman said, 'well he didn't fit in with the kids.' To which the woman in the wheelchair replied, 'but you didn't fit in either.'

Thus the world hands us stories on a plate.

(Jackson 2012)<sup>5</sup>

On a street corner in Belfast, near to Windsor Presbyterian church, I met a woman who was waiting for her husband. 'We're off to a funeral' she said. 'It's for the minister's son. So sad. He was at university in England and was killed just before he graduated.' In the Black Box arts venue on Hill Street, a woman stood before two hundred people, most of them strangers, and told us about a life-model in a drawing class. He was naked. He was enormous! Next to the Harland and Wolff shipyard, a man showed me a photograph of two large yellow cranes photoshopped with the letters 'L&G' and 'B&T', reclaiming this iconic feature of the Belfast skyline for his own queer identity. In a hair salon on Botanic Avenue, a hairdresser dramatically recounted a story of child abuse and unwanted immigration. And in a short story collection that promised Troubles on the book jacket, small 't' troubles were smuggled in.

Thus does Belfast hand us stories on a plate.

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<sup>5</sup> Electronic book, no page number. Quoted from the chapter 'Taking a line for a walk'.

## Chapter Two

### LOVELY DAY FOR A DANDER

#### Stories On The Street Corner

‘OK, Torridon, let’s go for a walk!’

The dog twirls around in excitement as I put on her lead. I talk to her a lot, even though I know she doesn’t understand the words.

‘Now remember, you’re working as my research assistant.’

The living room door opens directly onto the tiny front yard outside my house on Olympia Drive. The moment we step outside I see Nellie, my next-door neighbour.

‘Where’s my mate?’ she asks with a big smile and Torridon, tail wagging furiously, puts her front paws on the small wall between our yards and is rewarded with a stroke on the head.

‘I’ve got something for you!’ she says to the dog, and goes back inside, returning a minute later with a box of dog biscuits.

I first spoke to Nellie a couple of months after I’d moved to Belfast, as she was potting up some bedding plants in her front yard. She knew I was something to do with the university, as Ellen down the road had told her, and even before we met she’d bought Torridon some treats, having asked her granddaughter (who works with dogs) what were the best kind to buy. We had quite a long chat that first time, mainly about her family and all the bereavements she’d suffered.

‘Three children gone in seven years. They say you’re supposed to go first but it isn’t like that.’

Her health isn’t too good either. She tells me she’s eighty-three but at least she’s back doing some gardening and the petunias look quite cheerful. A lot of her family still live close by; her unmarried son a few doors up the street, her widowed daughter-in-law around the corner and her great niece a few doors down. She lost her husband quite a few years ago now.

‘Have you always lived in this house then?’ I asked.

‘Oh no! Only since I was married. I was born in Runnymede Parade.’

Runnymede Parade is the next street along.



This morning, she updates me on her health problems and tells me about visiting her niece in Bangor, some fourteen miles from Belfast along the County Down coast.

‘Where are you off to now then?’ she asks.

‘We’re heading up to Lisburn Road, to wander around, see where we end up.’

‘It’s a lovely day for a dander,’ she smiles.

**Dander:** verb. To walk idly or purposelessly; to stroll, saunter. Scottish and northern [Irish] dialect (Oxford English Dictionary 2017a).



**Figure 1 Friends and neighbours** <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All photographs by author unless otherwise stated

In the city, the density of people and the concentration of different activities result in the opportunity – and experience – of myriad fleeting encounters with strangers. On many occasions we will not engage with the stranger: they pass by unnoticed and unacknowledged. Sometimes we may consciously or subconsciously acknowledge their presence; at other times we have short verbal and non-verbal exchanges. For example, conversations with shopkeepers, passing the time of day with someone standing at the bus stop, asking or being asked for directions, or a comment on the weather with a passer-by. The very density of population in the city means that opportunities to engage with strangers become a frequent and familiar encounter.

When these superficial encounters do progress to verbal exchange, they are predicated on a cooperative process that enables an intersubjective sharing of lifeworlds. I use the term ‘lifeworld’ here as Björn Kraus (2015) does, separating it epistemologically from the term ‘life condition’, where the latter represents the material and immaterial things in one’s world. Lifeworld is the subjective perception of one’s life conditions. When engaging with a stranger, whether for a few moments or for ten minutes, we enter into a transitory and temporary relationship with the other person and share something of ourselves, even if that is only revealing a desire to purchase a particular item or express an opinion about the rain that might be on the way. Sometimes these comments turn into short stories.

This chapter describes some of the many encounters that Torridon and I had during fieldwork. Torridon is a Wheaten Terrier and when we arrived in Belfast in February 2014 she was only ten months old. When I was out with her I was frequently stopped and asked about her breed, from where her name originates (Loch Torridon in Scotland) and whether her coat needs regular grooming (it does), and the leader of a walking group we joined declared she was ‘a great canine ambassador’. When I am walking the dog in the city, the intersubjectivity that is brought about through momentary encounters includes her: Torridon is a sentient animal who exercises agency, initiating interactions with people. She also provokes reactions – some people seek *her* out.

Dandering through this chapter, in the sections subtitled ‘Walking the dog’, is an amalgam of the many walks that Torridon and I had. This leitmotif enables me to

introduce the reader to the people I met and the stories they told me, and to introduce Belfast by way of descriptions of the places we visited. My intention is to give a sense of wandering through the city and its environs. Thus I render some of the conversations as dialogue to try to capture the fleeting immediacy of engagements with strangers, and these vignettes, as with the one above, are intentionally written in a present-tense, verb-contracted storied style, with academic references as footnotes so that the narrative flow is uninterrupted.

However, the primary aim of this chapter is to demonstrate, through a discussion of my ethnographic data, how Torridon assisted me to connect with people, and to analyse why Torridon-as-method works, drawing on a range of theories. The academic discussion is driven by the ethnographic data. Therefore, each walk-description precedes the related analysis, as I argue that Torridon not only made it easier to talk to some people, she also elicited stories that would otherwise not be told. Walking with Torridon vastly increased the random-stranger-to-anthropologist encounter ratio as people sought to engage with her. She facilitated rapid entry to dog-focused or dog-friendly activities and she authenticated my presence when meandering around a neighbourhood or going out for late-night walks, since, in Belfast, neither of these activities are considered to be odd with a dog. I draw on the concept of the 'modern stranger' (Harman 1988:3) who is neither within nor outwith the group, where encounters with strangers are 'an everyday fact of life in the city' (McWeeny 2016:2). I also apply Benjamin's notion of the *flâneur* (1983), walking being 'a significant part of urban rhythms and practises' (Shortell 2016:2) and consider what can be learnt from the numerous passing encounters I had whilst walking the dog where 'insights are admittedly gained more by chance than by system' (Schlör 1998:15).

To analyse how Torridon-as-method works, I consider: a bio-psycho-social model; actor network theory; the political concept of creative ambiguity; and cosmopolitanism. But I conclude that no one explanation is sufficient: an epistemic assemblage is required to understand the complexity of human and (other) animal relationships. Torridon does not simply mediate the anthropological encounter: the relationship between dog and human is reciprocal. The extent to which each actor

responds to the other prolongs and moulds the encounter; it is this dynamic connection that elicits stories.

Torridon increased my visibility in the city, especially in areas where strangers would be noticed, but for all intents and purposes I was merely walking the dog. However, both human and canine were discovering ‘the social archaeology of community (...) [where] layers of repeated meetings build, over time, into friendships or remain as they are – tiny intimacies or nodding [and sniffing] acquaintanceships’ and we can take advantage of ‘the everyday serendipities that go along with simply being outside’ (Davis 2013).<sup>7 8</sup>

***Walking the dog:*** Torridon and I set off from Olympia Drive but we’ve only gotten as far as the corner shop when a man exclaims ‘Hello Pup!’ and enthusiastically strokes her... then speaks to me. He’s a Yorkshireman; living in Belfast for six years now. Although I haven’t seen him before we’re soon deep in conversation about being an outsider in the city and he shares his views on political incorrectness.

‘My wife works for Hansard, you know, up at Stormont.

I nod in reply.

‘She told me about this policy document they had, something to do with learning disabilities. It was translated into Ulster Scots. D’you know what they called them?’

‘No, what?’ I ask, puzzled.

‘Wee dafty bairns! Can you believe it? In this day and age? You’d never get away with it anywhere else’.<sup>9</sup> We chat for another twenty minutes or so, on topics as diverse as atheism, ‘Dreamies’ cat treats, the punk poet John Cooper Clarke, and then go our separate ways.

Torridon and I continue walking alongside red-brick terraces and I muse about when they were built, in the early nineteenth century, to house workers for

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from abstract (hence no page number).

<sup>8</sup> A substantial part of this chapter is published (Lane 2015a).

<sup>9</sup> I am unable to identify this specific document but all official government documents are translated into both Irish and Ulster Scots.

the then nearby Linfield Mill.<sup>10</sup> They're small – two-up-two-down – and are referred to as 'kitchen houses', a term I hear many people use. Back then they would have housed large, intergenerational families. Some now have extensions built on the back, and all have inside bathrooms,<sup>11</sup> but they're typical of the terraced streets in UK industrial towns such as Belfast, Glasgow and Manchester. In this area – the few streets around Olympia Drive – we're on the edge of what's referred to as 'the Village', which really starts the other side of Tates Avenue. Along with nearby Sandy Row and Donegall Road areas, it's associated with Protestants, unionism, and with loyalist paramilitaries who 'control' the streets.<sup>12</sup> Many walls have paramilitary murals, many lampposts and some houses fly Union Jacks and Ulster flags, UVF or UDA flags. The Village is one of the poorest areas of the city, despite a few streets of newly built social housing.<sup>13</sup> There's a number of migrants living here, and some of the 'upwardly mobile' too, since housing is cheap both to rent and to buy. But most of the people in the area are white, working-class and Protestant, and have lived here for many years, like Nellie.

Once we're over the railway bridge by Windsor Park football stadium, the housing changes. Here are 'parlour houses', still terraced but built for those with a little more money. These houses have small gates leading to small front gardens, and front doors leading to hallways and then into the bow-windowed sitting rooms – the best rooms – known as parlours. As Torridon and I walk up Adelaide Street three people are standing outside the garden gate of one of these parlour houses, waving off an elderly couple getting into a car. Torridon pauses in front of them but they take no notice of her, so she nudges the woman's hand and is stroked, and the people smile and ask me what kind of dog she is.

As we wander aimlessly through the streets we change direction or go down roads that look interesting, but soon arrive at Lisburn Road, the main thoroughfare

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<sup>10</sup> Linfield Spinning Mill opened in 1833 (O'Regan and Magee 2014:46).

<sup>11</sup> In a 2004 housing survey, 5% of homes were unfit for human habitation with over half having inadequate bathing and sanitary facilities (Northern Ireland Housing Executive 2004).

<sup>12</sup> In the Village, Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association are the predominant loyalist paramilitary organisations. Their control includes when and where flags are erected on lampposts (see Bryan and Gillespie, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> (EmployAbility South Belfast n.d.)

through and out of south Belfast, where the concentration of shops, cafés and businesses usually means lots of opportunity to meet people. We walk to the corner by Windsor Presbyterian Church and Torridon wags her tail, making eye contact with an elderly woman.

‘What a lovely dog! So friendly. What kind of dog is she?’

‘A Wheaten Terrier.’

‘I’ve not heard of them. What’s her name?’ and the smiling woman puts down the two bags of shopping she’s clutching.

‘Torridon,’ I say, and I tell her about Loch Torridon, my favourite part of the Scottish Highlands.

‘I used to have a dog,’ she says, and after we speak about this for a few minutes, she tells me why she’s waiting on the corner for her husband.

‘We’re off to a funeral. It’s for the minister’s son. So sad. He was at university in England and was killed just before he graduated.’

‘Killed? How awful,’ I reply.

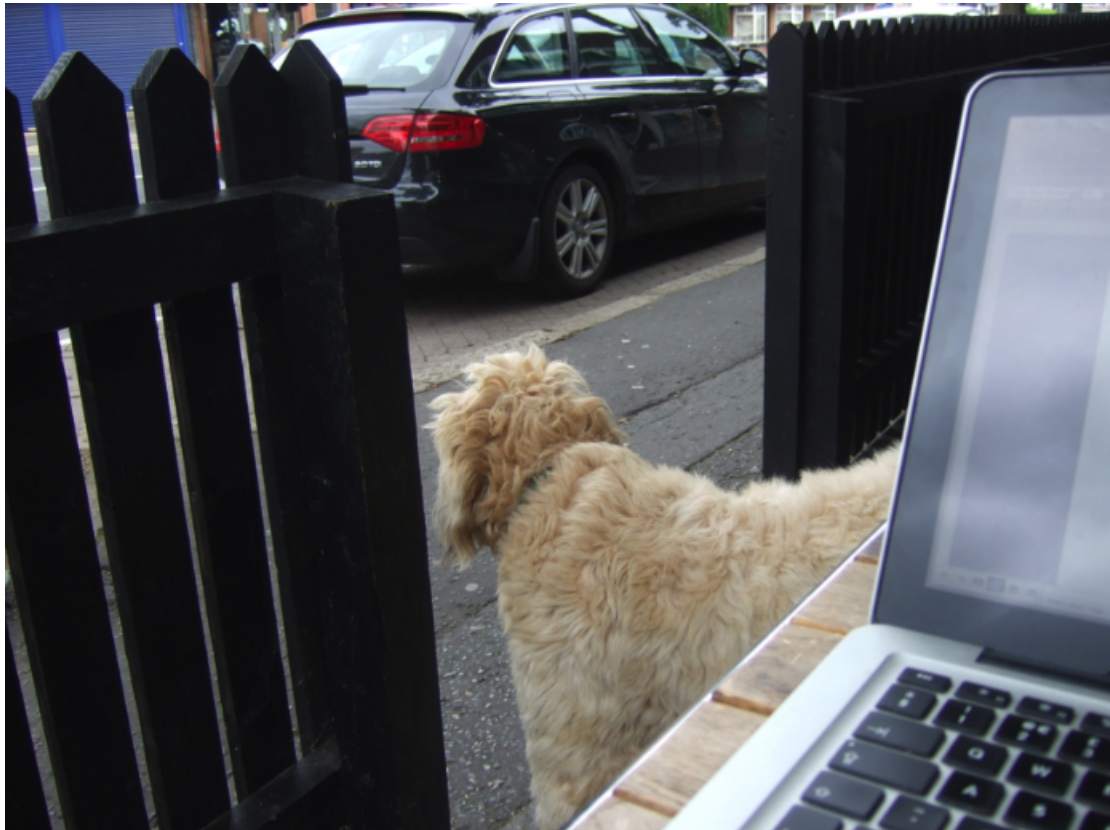
‘Yes, we think he was murdered but I don’t like to ask.’

Then her husband arrives and she picks up her shopping and says goodbye, and Torridon and I continue down Lisburn Road.

We haven’t gone far when a man runs up and breathlessly asks if she’s a Wheaten and where did I find the breeder: a quick conversation this one, as he’s parked on a double-yellow line with the engine running. He already has a Wheaten, who’s very old, and the kids want a puppy. I give him some information and then he runs back to his car and we carry on walking. About fifty yards further on, a woman is sitting at a bus stop and she asks what kind of dog I have and we chat about dogs until her bus comes.

Soon we reach Espresso Elements, one of my favourite cafés. Although dogs are not allowed inside there’s a small patio area at the front and it’s a good place to catch up on fieldnotes. I settle down to type and Torridon places herself where she can maximise her chances of meeting people; my research assistant working on my behalf while I’m otherwise occupied. After a short while, a woman interrupts my typing. Leaning over the little fence she says:

‘Excuse me. What a gorgeous dog you’ve got. May I pat her?’



**Figure 2 Torridon on the lookout**

### **Strangers And Serendipity**

These interactions were typical of my walks with Torridon. Given my fieldwork remit – to collect the quotidian stories of people living in Belfast – it is easy to see why I considered her to be my research assistant: people stopped me all the time to talk to Torridon and sometimes this included talking to me. This recalls and extends Davis’s notion of serendipity quoted earlier (2013). However this is not just the everyday serendipity of being outside that Davis identified; Torridon initiated these encounters, she *fostered* serendipity. For example, outside the corner shop Torridon enabled me to take advantage of the Yorkshireman’s interest in her, but in Adelaide Street she was not satisfied with being unnoticed and so nudged the woman’s hand, and outside the café she purposefully placed herself in a prominent position.

People’s connections with Torridon, and with me through her, fell into a broad range of interactions. Many engaged only with the dog, smiling at her as they

walked past. Sometimes human interaction was restricted to a fleeting comment. For example, one man in Belfast city centre proclaimed, 'fabulous dog!' as he strode by; a child down the street exclaimed, 'that doggy looks like Sandy from Annie!' as she tugged her mother's arm. I have even been told, 'I'm not a dog person, but I really like her!' Often people stopped to talk to the dog, but did not talk to me. In dog-walking terms this is socially acceptable, since the dog acts as a mediator. Indirect non-verbal communication between the humans – between the admirer and the owner – is via the admired; positive regard is expressed and accepted (both humans are usually smiling), but there is no need for speech or even eye contact. Meanwhile, the unwritten, unspoken rules on personal space are relaxed as we all come close – the stranger sometimes crouching down to be at Torridon's eye level while I stand by. This enables a type of distant intimacy: communicative distance with physical proximity. Meanwhile, in participant-observation terms, Torridon and the stranger are the immediate participants while I observe from the other end of the lead, connected but distanced, watching as they engage in intimate haptic, visual and, for the dog, olfactory contact. This is not dissimilar to the role that children can play in this type of encounter (Starrs et al. 2001). Indeed, sitting outside Espresso Elements one day, a young mother and myself had a whole conversation with each other by talking to the dog and the child without even glancing at or speaking directly to each other until it was time to say goodbye.

Although Torridon was effective in connecting me to people, a month into my fieldwork a journal entry notes that these connections seemed quite random and purposeless, and that I was not meeting anyone more than briefly, or more than once. I wondered if I would ever learn anything from this. But then I noted that this is the nature of urban life: having lived in London for over twenty-five years I was entirely comfortable with this level of interaction at home, and yet, in the field, I was expecting more. Why was this so? Maybe because now I wanted to focus on 'strangers', wanted them to engage with me and to furnish me with their stories.

It will help here to define what I mean by the term 'stranger'. The colloquial understanding is of individuals who do not know each other. The vast majority of people I met, while walking Torridon, I had never met before and, with almost all of them, I never met them again. There is a large body of literature on the stranger and



it is not my intention to interrogate this fully, but in order to put my use of the term 'stranger' into a theoretical framework I will discount certain analyses. I am not using the term as Simmel (1950) does, that of the stranger as an outsider (spatially and socially), and as a wanderer. Although Simmel's stranger may describe *my* position walking around Belfast, it would not, as a rule, describe the people I met on the street, who may have lived in the city all their lives, and who are, most likely, purposefully moving from A to B. For Simmel, these people would constitute the host group, the in-group for whom I was the stranger, yet as individuals they are likely, by and large, to be strangers to each other, just as they were to me. Casey notes that to be a stranger is to come from elsewhere (2011:40) but does this 'elsewhere' have to be a place? I had lived in my flat in London for over twelve years with the same neighbours but we did not speak until I had Torridon. The man in the top floor flat on my right had watched the dog play in the garden, and after he and I did speak we bumped into each other frequently, because he often walked to the local shops just around the corner. So we must have walked past each other at some point in the previous ten years, probably many times. Our previous 'elsewheres' were not physical places as such, but our lifeworlds that were unknown to each other until the dog acted as a catalyst. Hence people on the streets of Belfast can be strangers to one another even if they all reside there.

Neither am I using the term 'stranger' as proponents of the Chicago School would, such as Park's 'marginal man [who is] striving to live in two diverse cultural groups' (Park 1928:881). My engagement with people in Belfast was based on enough common reference points to deem that neither of us was radically different from the other. For example we were geographically close in terms of national identity (English and mainly Northern Irish), we had an unspoken but shared knowledge of British history and Belfast's Troubles, and most often shared a mother tongue and an understanding of each others' accents. Rather, as noted earlier, I am using Lesley Harman's notion of the 'modern stranger', whereby she challenges the view of the stranger 'as a self-contained outsider' (1988:3) and instead recasts the stranger as an expert navigator, where in modern urban life encounters with strangers become the rule not the exception and people learn to navigate these relationships with relative ease.

We meet strangers at literal and metaphorical thresholds (Kearney and Semonovich 2011:4), such as at the door of one's home or at the threshold of an experience. At this point we are separated by 'the translucent wall of potential conversation' (Harman 1988:7); two bodies in close proximity faced with a choice – to engage or not. We have to make a judgement about the other person and their possible reaction to us, 'we are compelled to make a wager between hospitality and hostility' (Kearney and Semonovich 2011:5). But if we opt for the former and breach the translucent wall, we enter, even if momentarily, into someone else's lifeworld and in doing so, we can learn something about them.

In the many encounters I had in Belfast, I rarely felt uncomfortable with a stranger, especially when I was with Torridon. Therefore my use of the term in this chapter is best summed up as 'persons whom I have not met and do not know as individuals, but who do not appear strange, unfamiliar or unknowable at the threshold of our encounters; and people with whom I can more easily engage when I walk the dog'.

***Walking the dog:*** Torridon and I leave Espresso Elements and turn down Cranmore Gardens. We're in Malone now. Large detached houses with driveways sweeping through beautiful landscaped gardens, fewer cars parked on the roads and fewer people walking around. The gardens are well stocked and established, with laburnum, camellia, cherry, roses and deep beech hedges, and I notice we're not in 'streets' anymore but in wide, tree-lined 'avenues' and 'parks': Cadogan Park, Adelaide Park, Derryvolgie Avenue, Windsor Avenue, walking past homes built in the eighteenth century for Belfast's wealthy industrialists, such as Thomas Andrews, the popular managing director of Harland and Wolff, who worked his way up through the company and went down with the *Titanic*.<sup>14</sup> It even smells different here – walking past Inchmarlo, a prestigious preparatory school, the air is filled with sweetness, probably from the flowering linden trees in the grounds. The foliage seems to soften the edges of the buildings, the leafiness to muffle noise. It all seems a far cry from the Village just a mile down Lisburn Road. As we walk around the

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<sup>14</sup> Andrews was the ship's designer (Foster 2014b)

triple-named Marlborough Park (North, South and Central) it reminds me of Hampstead Garden Suburb in London: arts and crafts style houses, middle-class and 'village-y' in an exclusive, expensive kind of way. But then my reverie is interrupted by a barking miniature Schnauzer in one of the gardens who is most upset by Torridon's presence.

'Hello!' The noisy-dog's owner smiles broadly. 'He's OK, he's just defending his territory,' and she tells the dog to shut up, which it does not. Nevertheless we fall into conversation about dogs, why I'm in Belfast, where I'm from and Siobhan's love of London theatre, for by now we have exchanged names.

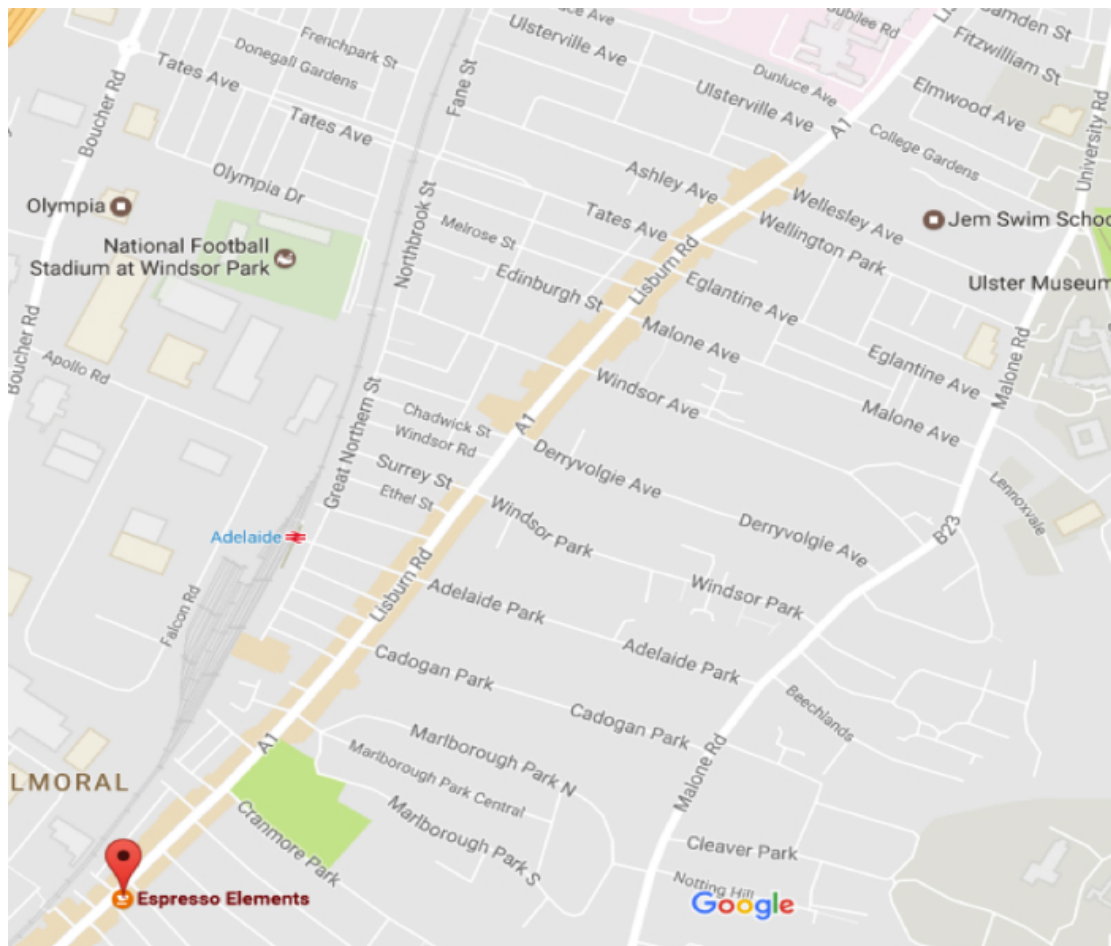


Figure 3 Map of Malone area

## Streetwalking

Torridon and I went on different kinds of walks. The ones described thus far are what I refer to as ‘street walks’, where we would meander around with no particular destination in mind, other than exploring a particular neighbourhood, and I would often let Torridon decide the route, going where a dog’s nose took us. Street walks were different from hill walks (Belfast is surrounded by hills). On hill walks we were either completely alone or walking with a large, organised group, and we had a route in mind, a map in hand, and were often out for much of the day. Meanwhile, strolls along the sandy beaches that fringe Belfast Lough and the littoral of Counties Down and Antrim, or walks along the River Lagan, were shorter, linear ‘there and back’ walks. And then there were the very quick walks, usually late at night or first thing in the morning, which had a hurry-up-and-pee practical purpose and tended to be confined to the streets immediately around my house.

The interactions we had with people on these walks were different too – something that Lucas (2008) notes in his ethnographic walks. In the hills, by the sea and along the river, other people were often walking for their own pleasure, and the nature of our interactions seemed, somehow, more leisurely: as we passed strangers a greeting or comment on the weather was routine. Meanwhile in the immediate vicinity of my house we would meet the neighbours, and regular morning- or night-walkers who were often out with their own dogs, and here I met people more than once, gradually building on the greeting-and-comment relationships. But on our long, dandering street walks, not only were we constantly engaging with strangers but, more pertinently, *strangers were going out of their way to engage with us*. In the hills, or by the sea or the river, our interactions were with people who were proximate to us. However, on street walks many people who were not immediately close by would *change direction* to meet Torridon, crossing the street to stroke her or following us around until they could catch up and engage with the dog, like the woman at the St Patrick’s Day parade in the city centre, seen in Figure 4. Some people *changed their intended actions*, such as stopping for a few moments even when they were in a hurry to meet a friend or were parked on a double yellow line. Sometimes Torridon drew quite a crowd as people huddled around to cuddle her

and others stopped to see what all the fuss was about (see Figure 5). This is in direct contrast to Jo Vergunst's experience of street walking in the centre of Aberdeen:

Approaching strangers on the street itself for anything other than a short functional conversation will almost always lead to suspicion or alarm, such being the distinctive maintenance of privacy despite the public setting of the street. This means that Union Street is usually a place where one meets people one already knows, rather than new people.

(Vergunst 2010:380)



**Figure 4 Woman on St Patrick's Day declares this to be  
*'the best dog snog I've ever had!'***



**Figure 5 Torridon draws a crowd**

Torridon also facilitated and maintained longer-term relationships. We were members of the 'Belfast Dynamos', a large group of people who meet regularly to walk and socialise in the hills, coastline and countryside around the city. Torridon was a popular member. With sometimes up to seventy people participating, she walked with the group rather than with me, stopping occasionally to check my whereabouts but most of the time running up and down the line of people, playing joyfully with other dogs. Comments on the group message board sometimes made reference to her, such as this one from Alan after our first walk:

'On Sat I saw a Wheaten enjoy herself; 'twas terrific! Bounding here and there, leaping over logs, sniffing interesting sniffs. Oh yes please bring the Wheaten along; her sheer enjoyment was very infectious!'

(Belfast Dynamos 2014)

Over the months and walks that followed, Alan, Torridon and I developed a friendship and he and I shared and recorded his stories.

Although all of the walks I did with Torridon were 'fieldwork', since even night walks could (and often did) yield interesting encounters, on our long street walks I felt more of a *flâneuse* (Elkin 2016; Bagheri 2016): an intentional observer and wanderer, often with no pre-planned itinerary but allowing the walk direction to develop organically (Vergunst 2008), alert to the potential of unknown places and people while leaving it to my research assistant to initiate engagement with others. In Walter Benjamin's essay '*The Flâneur*' he traces the art of streetwalking in the literature of Baudelaire and Poe, where 'the street becomes a dwelling' (1983:37), a place to linger and to observe, a place as familiar as one's home. Baudelaire's *flâneur* was 'the unknown man' in the crowd (Benjamin 1983:48) unobtrusively observing others. Keith Tester understands *flânerie* as 'the observation of the fleeting and the transitory' (1994:7). This makes it a useful method to study random and fleeting encounters with strangers.

Alan Bairner (2006) employs *flânerie* as a research method in Belfast, wandering around the city to observe the changes he has noticed over the years. However, his descriptions paint a picture of people and places in the city that are strangely devoid of dialogue and engagement, as if he is somehow 'other' to the people around him, in the way that Zygmunt Bauman (1994) frames the *flâneur* as a stranger who is distant and apart from others. Erving Goffman (1963) proposed the notion of civil inattention between strangers, whereby a glance can both acknowledge the other's presence and, at the same time, indicate no necessity to engage further. When I walked the streets of Belfast alone, people rarely engaged with me uninvited and 'Goffman's glance' did appear to negotiate our distance from each other. But when I was with Torridon the connections were different, on street walks in particular. Benjamin disagreed that the *flâneur* is *incognito* (2007) and that was certainly my experience with Torridon. She seemed to invite and even initiate civil *attention* and this was often extended to me. For Bairner (2006) *flânerie* is a research method to observe the city and the people. I extend this concept to *la flâneuse et la chienne*, such that, when Torridon and I work as a team, walking the



dog becomes *participant* observation, a method not only to observe but to *engage* with others.

***Walking the dog:*** 24<sup>th</sup> of July and it's really hot. Torridon lies on the cool kitchen tiles but she's panting; a swim would help her feel more comfortable. According to the map there's a lake in the Bog Meadows, directly opposite the end of Olympia Drive as the crow flies, down below Divis Mountain; but there's no direct route since the busy M1 motorway separates this 'Protestant' part of South Belfast from 'Catholic' West Belfast. So we walk down Glenmachan Street to Broadway Roundabout, where half the lampposts fly Union Jacks and the other half have Sinn Féin election posters, signalling the boundary, the interface. In the centre of the roundabout there's a large sculpture, two geodesic domes constructed as a globe within a globe. It always looks particularly spectacular lit up at night when I walk over Tates Avenue Bridge and see it rising up like a huge harvest moon. The sculpture's name is Rise and it was erected in 2011 as a symbol of hope for Belfast's future.<sup>15</sup> From here it's a short walk up to the Falls Road. As soon as the project was announced in the local press, with an artist's impression of the sculpture, it became known in local parlance, and somewhat less idealistically, as The Balls on the Falls.<sup>16</sup>

After we cross the roundabout, Torridon and I turn down Rodney Parade and walk through the St James area into the verdant Bog Meadows. We wander along a lush, tree-lined path providing welcome shade, tall grasses on either side and even taller velvet-brown bulrushes hinting at water, although we don't find the lake and we end up at the bottom end of Milltown Cemetery, next to the area where tens of thousands of unnamed babies are buried in unmarked graves in unconsecrated ground.<sup>17</sup> But I don't have long to muse on this awfulness because Torridon spots a collie and a beagle and, despite the heat, begins to play with them. I fall into conversation with the dogs' human companions, two nine-year old boys whiling away this drowsily-hot long-summer afternoon.

'You don't normally walk here do you?' says Declan.

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<sup>15</sup> (Hocking 2015)

<sup>16</sup> (Meban 2010)

<sup>17</sup> (Stewart 2010)



‘I’m looking for the lake but I can’t find it,’ I reply.

‘But there is one! Shall we show you?’ they enthusiastically chorus together. So I follow them through a hole in the fence of the Gaelic football pitch.

‘We’re not supposed to go this way but if we’re quick...’ and they don’t wait for my reply so I run with them across the field. As we saunter down another shady path they point out a wild plum tree: the ripened fruit is out of their reach (so they tell me) and I pull on a few branches to scrump the ones I can get. As we linger at the bridge over the stream the dogs splash around in the water and the boys chat together – about what they did in the holidays and of the paedophile seen flashing in the meadows (about which they seem unconcerned).

‘So where do you live then?’ Liam asks me.

‘Oh, over there,’ I say and I wave vaguely towards the other side of the motorway, knowing the significance won’t be lost on them.



**Figure 6 Torridon in the Bog Meadows**

## Telling Tales

In Belfast it is a social taboo to ask someone's religion or ethnic identity outright; so you find out (or, more accurately, assume) through their name, where they live, the school they attend, the sports they participate in, or by listening to how they pronounce certain words. This practice of 'telling' (Burton 1978; Cairns 2000; Wilson and Donnan 2006) serves to establish the parameters for social behaviour in any given situation. In the walk to the Bog Meadows there were many telling signs, for example the 'Protestant' flags and 'Catholic' posters on the lampposts at the roundabout, the 'Catholic' names Declan and Liam, my 'Protestant' British accent, the 'Catholic' Gaelic football field, my vague wave towards the 'Protestant' Village. In a sectarian – and violent – society, an ability to read these signs can be a survival strategy, and there are many accounts of how people used this information to keep their heads down and out of trouble, or to fall foul of it with sometimes-fatal results (*cf* Macauley 2011; O'Callaghan 1999). But telling is so much a part of the warp and weft of life in Belfast that, although it is over twenty years since the ceasefires, it still continues and has become (probably always was) a sub conscious act. Lanclos (2003) suggests that children as young as nine are adept at telling and my experience in the Bog Meadows supports this.

As a practice, using telling to ascertain the religion of the other is deeply ingrained. For example, Horatio, a twenty-five-year-old from South Belfast who deeply eschews sectarianism, is not religious, does not want his life to be dominated or even influenced by the Troubles/post-conflict etc. still 'clocks a Catholic name' when he hears one. My neighbour Nellie once said to me, 'I don't know what you are and I don't need to know' after we had conversed over the garden wall for several months and she had explicitly told me she was Protestant. I was not sure at the time whether her comment was an invite for me to tell her or a signal not to (I chose not to). When the Yorkshireman and I had a twenty-minute conversation outside the corner shop, he told me he was an atheist and I confirmed that was my position too: it was as though we needed to signal to each other that we did *not* participate in this Northern Irish practice, yet by its very nature this exchange acknowledged the ubiquity of telling.

The practice of telling is extended to political positions and the adoption of other causes. For example, republicans show support for Palestinians, aligning themselves as fellow national liberationists pitted against an invading force (Rolston 1992; Doyle 2007). Meanwhile loyalist support for Israel is, to a certain extent in retaliation to the former, but also in recognition of the uncompromising attitude of the Israeli government towards Palestinians (Hamber 2006; Hill and White 2008). The photograph below shows 'Viva Palestine' written in the hills of 'Catholic' West Belfast and the Israeli flag fluttering alongside the Union Jack in 'Protestant' Tates Avenue. Telling is also a source of humour: the old joke about needing to be either a Catholic Jew or Protestant Jew now has an updated version, namely 'Are you a Catholic Muslim or a Protestant Muslim?' (McVeigh 2007:4), meanwhile 'Horatio' playfully suggested his pseudonym as one that does not identify him religiously.



**Figure 7 'Viva Palestine' written in the hills**

Although Belfast is now claimed as a post-conflict city (Neill 2006), with an increasing number of tourists, there are still areas where interface tension sometimes spills into violence (Cochrane 2013). It is a small city, composed of even smaller neighbourhoods, areas where people notice strangers who are not from that place. I do not wish to overstate this: middle-class Belfast, areas like Malone, looks like middle-class Anytown, which is why it reminded me of Hampstead Garden Suburb in London. But, for example, the area where I lived, Union Jack and Ulster be-flagged, is a particularly Northern Irish feature, and with the menace of paramilitary insignia indicating whether you are in UVF or UDA territory it is not somewhere people would think to wander at night. But walking the dog gave me a reason, just as it did in the Bog Meadows or down the Falls Road. Torridon authenticated my being-there (Geertz 1988).

Walking the dog is not usually about going from A to B in a purposeful manner: she stops and sniffs and urinates and I have time to look around, while my phone voice recorder enables me to make fieldnotes on the go. On the afternoon of the eleventh of July, when the streets in loyalist areas were thronging with neighbours holding street parties to celebrate Protestant supremacy, and men and boys built bonfires that would burn Irish flags and Catholic insignia later that night, I comfortably wandered those streets, walking the dog, answering questions about what breed, what name, is that coat difficult to groom. Likewise, attending the Twelfth Parade on the Lisburn Road (see Figure 8) or the Easter Sunday parade on the Falls Road; I was walking the dog and answering questions about her while a crowd of children found Torridon more interesting than political speeches. Moreover, being a woman walking a dog probably made me more approachable.





**Figure 8 Torridon at 'the Twelfth'**

Torridon is a friendly dog, alert to her surroundings, and her personality is very evident. She displays positive, accepting behaviour and people respond; the social signals that each give off are of friendliness and politeness (Brunet et al. 2012)

– the human smiling and patting the dog, the dog’s tail wagging and she is not jumping up – so the reciprocal relationship between dog and stranger becomes a virtuous circle of interaction. However, Torridon also enables people to sidestep the telling game, as the next walk shows.

***Walking the Dog:*** It’s warm and sunny as Torridon and I walk up to the Falls Road to watch the Easter Sunday parade. We’re early, but people are already starting to gather. There are flags everywhere, on lampposts, attached to cars, hung in shop windows, and carried in many hands. They’re mainly the Irish tricolour of green, white and gold, but there are also blue flags bearing a starry plough (denoting the Irish Citizen Army, a now defunct republican socialist movement), and yellow flags with a red cross and a red hand, the flag of the *nine* counties of Ulster (of which three are in the Republic of Ireland).<sup>18</sup> There are a few Palestinian flags too. When we get to Milltown Cemetery a large crowd lines the streets and I try a few different vantage points, eventually deciding that the small space next to the ice cream van will be good – particularly with an ice cream in my hand. Lots of people are carrying wreaths of green, white, and gold tissue-paper flowers and others carry real Easter lilies or other posies. What with the crowds and the sunshine, ice-creams and flower stalls, flags for sale (small tricolours £1, large ones £2) and really excited kids, there’s a carnival atmosphere. Police presence is quite muted – a couple of Land Rovers on the roundabout and one helicopter overhead.

‘They’re coming! Can you hear them? They’re coming!’ a child beside me exclaims and I hear the throb of drums in the distance. We all crane our necks to get a better view.

Three black taxis, driving in perfect formation, head up the parade. Then waves of people and bands pass the crowds: people dressed in what looks like 1920s combat gear; people holding large black and white photographs of (deceased) young

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Ulster’ is most used as a term synonymous with the six counties of Northern Ireland, particularly by unionists, but it relates to one of the four geographic regions of the island of Ireland (the others being Munster, Leinster and Connacht) and it covers the six counties of Northern Ireland and the three counties in Ireland that are coterminous with the border. Thus is it another contested word that has different meanings depending on who is using it and in what context.

men with 1970s hairstyles; people carrying furled flags; a troop of youngsters dressed in green, white and gold; so many groups of people interspersed with the beating drums and whistling pipes and jiggling tunes of different bands. It takes a long time for the parade to pass.

The last band in the parade has been marking time to the beat of a single drum in front of us for a few minutes, waiting for the bottleneck at Milltown Cemetery gates to ease. When they strike up and march forward Torridon makes out to follow them and the people standing next to us smile at her. Most of the crowd now drift off elsewhere but quite a few (although few in comparison) go into the cemetery and I hear a woman behind me say:

‘We’re going to your granddaddy’s grave now.’

I make my way in to the cemetery and follow the general flow towards a large tricolour flying high above a monument where a lone piper is playing. I stand at the back of the crowd. I can hear the political speeches and see flags being unfurled. Martina Anderson, Member of the European Parliament, is speaking and I record it on my phone.... ‘British oppression’... ‘peace process must go on’... condemnation of the murderers of the recently deceased Mister Thomas Crossan (‘Mister Thomas’, I note to myself, not ‘Tommy’ as he’s been constantly referred to on the news, and no mention that he was a dissident republican, or of the current speculation in the media that he was probably murdered by one of his own)<sup>19</sup>... but soon my attention is directed back to Torridon because she’s surrounded by five small children, about two to eight years old is my guess.

‘What’s your dog called?’ one child asks and I fall into conversation with them about their friends’ dogs.

‘What food does she like?’ another child says before running off, coming back a minute later with a cheese sandwich and the kids take it in turns to feed the dog.

Soon the ceremony is over, people begin to leave and the children skitter away to find their parents. But one young lad, maybe eight years old, is still stroking Torridon. His dad comes up and asks me what kind of dog she is, what’s her name,

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<sup>19</sup> Crossan was murdered on Good Friday, allegedly by dissident republicans (who do not accept the Good Friday Agreement) (Belfast Media Group 2014).

and after a short chat about Torridon he walks on. But the child lingers and his dad comes back for him.

‘Come on Michael, time to go. That’s the longest you’ve been with a dog. Well done.’

The dad tells me that, until recently, Michael was afraid of dogs.

‘Thank you. Your dog’s done a very good turn today.’

### ***Creative Ambiguity***

Easter Sunday is a high point in the parading year of republicans and Catholics, celebrating the 1916 ‘Easter Rising’ in Dublin against the British government (Ireland was at that time ruled by the British). Although the coup failed, it was a seminal event in Irish history, ‘a date that still holds all the sacrificial significance of High Mass for Irish Republicans’ (Coogan 2005:3). The Easter Sunday ceremony in Milltown Cemetery is held at the 1916 memorial, situated close to the graves of the 1981 hunger strikers, the ten republicans who died protesting against the British Government’s refusal to reinstate Special Category Status (effectively political prisoner status) for republican (and loyalist) prisoners (Ruane and Todd 1996). Bobby Sands was the first hunger striker to die. He was the elected Member of the British Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone at the time of his death. Although there were many politically driven hunger strikes in Irish history (Sweeney 1993), this particular one is arguably equal to 1916 as a touchstone for Irish republicanism (see Morrison 2006).

On Easter Sunday 2014 the dead were honoured through a reading, in Irish, of the 1916 Proclamation and the unfurling of flags, and contemporary republicanism was represented (in English) by expressions of anger about continuing British oppression, calls for a united Ireland and a respectful mention of Mr Thomas Crossan. While there are no paramilitary gun salutes anymore, it is still a highly charged atmosphere and one where a British accent such as mine would stand out, something I was conscious of as I stood at the back of the crowd. However, the encounter with the children and Michael’s father intrigued me; while I cannot make assumptions about the father’s views towards the British, the interaction between



boy and dog, and the subsequent interaction between his father and me, apparently transcended the highly political setting we were in. I suggest it was an example of 'creative ambiguity'.

This term (sometimes referred to as 'constructive ambiguity') is usually associated with sensitive political negotiations, where the intentional use of ambiguous language enables radically opposed factions to move forward: 'parties knowingly choose equivocal terms so they can pretend to agree even when they remain in basic disagreement' (Klieman 1999:13). It was a tactic employed by Prime Minister Tony Blair during the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland (Gordon 2010), since the major parties to the Agreement had to 'sell' politically charged issues, such as decommissioning weapons or prisoner-release schemes, to their own constituencies. Creative ambiguity in the Northern Ireland peace negotiations is credited with achieving a peace settlement (the Good Friday Agreement) but also with making subsequent government difficult (Knox and Carmichael 2005). For example, it was ambiguous as to whether decommissioning of guns should precede or be coterminus with Sinn Féin's inclusion in government. This lack of clarity led to different interpretations, post-Agreement, and to a suspension of devolved government on more than one occasion. In a BBC Radio 4 documentary, Connor Murphy of Sinn Féin highlighted the importance of creative ambiguity to create room for manoeuvre within contested discourse: 'in order that people could satisfy and reassure their own followers' (Ledgard 2014);<sup>20</sup> the unionists had to do the same thing... with the same proposals. 'Ambiguity' in negotiation then equates to polysemic meaning and it is 'creative' through an act of imagination to foresee a more positive future. Applying this concept to Torridon's role in Belfast, she becomes a mediatory device that enables people to sidestep the telling game.

For Zygmunt Bauman (1990) the stranger is an ambiguous figure that can be assigned to more than one category. My presence at Milltown Cemetery could prompt questions: Who was I and why was I there? Was I a bystander? A tourist? Journalist? Antagonist? But, despite any telling-assumptions that may be made about me and my ambiguous presence, people can choose instead to engage with a

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<sup>20</sup> Programme is no longer available. Quote taken from contemporaneous note.

quizzically named but unambiguous shaggy dog: she is a *dog* so no need to wonder if she is Catholic or Protestant, *her* presence is apolitical thereby creating an opportunity to connect. I am the stranger at the Milltown Cemetery ceremony but Torridon ameliorates my strangeness. Likewise, in my interaction with the boys in the Bog Meadows when I indicated where I lived by waving vaguely towards the Village – we talked about dogs, not religious spatial segregation, and we watched them splash around in the water.

Edward Casey (2011) uses Strangers Gate in Central Park, New York City as a metaphor to analyse the figure of the stranger, where the gateway is a liminal place that one must pass through to enter or exit the park. The etymology of the word ‘liminal’ comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold. For Victor Turner (1982), a liminal period is one of ambiguity that requires a *rite de passage* to allow safe transition from one social or psychological state to another. Following this notion of liminality, Casey (2011) suggests that strangers to the United States must undergo a *rite de passage* to enter the country, to get past the gatekeepers of immigration control. The gatekeeper is an important figure in ethnographic fieldwork (Burgess 2000); someone who enables (or denies) access to research participants. Taking these ideas together then, of gatekeepers and ambiguity and safe passage across the threshold, I suggest that Torridon acts as a kind of gatekeeper in my encounters with strangers in Belfast, easing my access to research participants. In Milltown Cemetery on Easter Sunday she enabled Michael’s father and me to negotiate the ambiguity, the liminality, of my presence, that of a Brit at a republican ceremony, and the interaction between Michael and Torridon acted as safe passage across the threshold. I am not suggesting that my presence at the cemetery was in anyway unsafe in a literal sense, but it was ambiguous and Torridon did connect with the children and with Michael’s father.

But on these and other walks, in my encounters with random strangers, does Torridon *only* connect? For the vast majority, I would say yes. However, there are occasions when she seems to be a field actor who *conditions* the encounter, occasions when Torridon elicits stories that would otherwise not be told.

***Walking the dog:*** It's spring and the first properly warm sunny day we've had since I arrived in Belfast, so Torridon and I head off for a walk along the River Lagan where she's in the water at the first opportunity. The swim energises her and she races off ahead of me towards a woman who is sitting on a bench with a bike resting by her side and a lit cigarette in her hand, no doubt a quiet moment of contemplation that is now interrupted by a river-wet dog!

'Oh, I'm really sorry,' I say, embarrassed, when I catch up, but the woman is smiling indulgently and stroking the soggy creature and we fall into an easy conversation as Torridon lies down next to her, curling around her legs.

'What are you doing in Belfast then?' she asks, still smiling, as my English accent signals my non-native status. She introduces herself as Jane and I tell her about my research.

'That's really interesting,' she says, 'I think it's important ordinary stories are heard,' and we get into a long conversation about hidden voices, Northern Irish politics, social conditions, and loyalist working-class areas. She used to live a couple of streets away from me and she works at the Windsor Women's Centre in the Village.

As our conversation draws to a close, she stokes Torridon again and smiles at her fondly.

'She reminds me of my dog. He passed away last year,' and I commiserate with Jane on her bereavement. Jane's keen to help with my research in any way she can so we exchange phone numbers and I carry on up the river with Torridon while Jane resumes her reverie in the sunshine.

### **Canine Elicitation Techniques**

In my fieldnote about meeting Jane, I pondered on why she spoke so candidly to a stranger, so when I met her again at the Women's Centre I asked her if Torridon was part of the reason she talked to me. She thought for a moment... then said 'no', it was because I was so open about being in Belfast to study people; and she reiterated again the importance of ordinary stories. I wish now to consider a number of theories that could explain why Jane spoke to me and to argue that, despite Jane's view, Torridon could have played a central role in eliciting Jane's stories.

Canine behaviourist, Alexandra Horowitz, suggests that dogs are good anthropologists because they pay close attention to human behaviour; 'they notice what is typical, and what is different' (2009:163) and they do this not just by looking but also by tasting and, more importantly, by smelling. Dogs have a superior olfactory sense with two to three hundred million sensory receptor sites in the nose compared to only six million in humans, and they breathe in through the front of the snout and out via two slits at the side, so they are constantly breathing in smells (Horowitz 2009). Indeed, dogs' sense of smell is used to detect medical conditions, such as cancer or diabetes (Willis et al. 2004; Browne et al. 2006; Moser and McCulloch 2010). Horowitz suggests that dogs pick up on our fluctuating hormone levels and the prosody of our speech, the inflections that indicate underlying intention, while patting a dog can reduce blood pressure and damp down an over-stimulated sympathetic nervous system. She refers to a study on interspecies hormonal interactions (Jones and Josephs 2006), which demonstrated that:

Levels of endorphins (hormones that make us feel good) and oxytocin and prolactin (those hormones involved with social attachment) go up when we're with dogs. Cortisol (stress hormone) levels go down. (...) In many cases the dog receives nearly the same effect. Human company can lower a dog's cortisol level; petting can calm a racing heart.

(Horowitz 2009:279-280; see also Nagasawa et al. 2009)

This suggests that Torridon's presence may have further relaxed Jane on that sunny day so that she was more open to discussion with me. And, although this may be a more tenuous connection, I wonder whether Torridon and Jane recognised something in each other relating to Jane's deceased dog? Anthropologist Samantha Hurn (2012) suggests that animals are able to empathise with members of other species (see also de Waal 2008). It is most unusual for Torridon to curl around someone's legs and doze off. It could have been post-swim, warm-sun tiredness, or maybe she sensed a hunger for comforting canine company.

The reason why Jane chose to talk could also be explained with actor-network theory (ANT), whereby it is the assemblage or heterogeneous network of people and objects that lead to the outcome (or effect in ANT-speak). Jane, Torridon, me, the bench, the lead (not attached), the warm sunny day, the river Lagan and the passers-by were all 'actants' in this grouping: it is the *combination* that matters. Each entity 'acquire[s] attributes in relation to others' and all are treated equally for analysis (Law 1999:4). Thus Jane spoke because all of these factors were present in this place at this time. Some actants are explained as intermediary – they are an important part of the network (for example, the bench Jane was sitting on) but they do not change the behaviour of the other actants. Mediatory devices, on the other hand, are actants that transform the network: Torridon interrupted Jane's afternoon, Jane and I had a conversation.

Mediatory devices can temporarily change the rules of social engagement: when talking to someone on the phone in the street, you are implicitly disengaging from the people around you and someone else is unlikely to interrupt your conversation unless it is urgent. Similarly, when engrossed in reading a book in a public place. I often used my phone to record fieldnotes. Although it is acceptable to talk out loud in the street when making a phone call, I once felt compromised when I thought I was overheard making notes, commenting on what I could see around me, such that I quickly turned the voice memo into one half of an imagined conversation, suddenly very conscious of the man behind me on the street. Torridon acts as a mediatory device, for example, by making it acceptable for me not to communicate verbally with someone who is stroking her, and she is transformational because she is an animate being actively engaging with her surroundings, including other people. She also changes the phone/book rules: I have been interrupted more than once during a phone call, and while deeply engrossed in a book, to be asked what kind of dog she is. This is a blatant breach of Goffman's rule of civil inattention.

In ANT the explanation of the effects is in the detail of the situation – it is a method more than a theory (Latour 1999); the knowledge gleaned is the product of the network (Law 1992); and agency is not limited to the humans in the group (Munro 2009). The use of 'agency' here does not equate with intentionality. For example, if Torridon had been on a lead that day by the Lagan it would have

prevented her from running up to Jane and the lead would be seen to have agency in this combination of actants. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore intentionality since, if Torridon had been on the lead, it would have been *my intention* that Torridon did not interrupt Jane that would have enabled Jane to continue snoozing. Meanwhile if Torridon was on the lead but I was not holding it, *her intention* to interrupt Jane would have been realised. ANT theorists say it is reductionist to give credence to social-psychological causal relationships and that we should concentrate only on the effects of the network; 'Latour wants to stick to what happens, and avoid recourse to pseudo-explanation in the form of motives, interests and intentions' (Munro 2009:125). But sentient beings do display intention and the inorganic world does not. This must be taken into account in an assemblage, not dismissed as reductionist.

In ANT, all actants are equal for analysis, but I suggest that within the heterogeneous network with Jane by the River Lagan, Torridon was more equal than the others and thus more deserving of analysis. If it is the combination that matters and we take Torridon out of that combination would Jane have spoken to me? She was enjoying the sunshine by the river – for all I know she could have had her eyes closed when Torridon thrust a wet snout on her knee. If that had not happened, I could have walked past without being seen or without attracting attention, being just another passer-by. It would have been a very different network. So, although it was that assemblage at that particular time that produced the conversation Jane and I had, Torridon was the most important member of that assemblage.

People stop to talk to me *because* of Torridon; it *is* a causal relationship. Torridon interrupted Jane's moment of solitude because she wanted to be stroked. ANT theorists ground their ideas firmly in the empirical (Latour 1999) and my empirical evidence is that Torridon mattered more than me or the bench or the sunny day. This recalls Prell, who suggests that it is the actants' positions in the network that matters in terms of who 'makes things happen' (Prell 2012:96). Torridon makes things happen – the fostering of serendipity that I referred to earlier in the chapter – thus it is difficult to reconcile this with an egalitarian view of actants. So, if ANT is left wanting, I need to turn to other explanations, and to another walk, to consider why Torridon works as my research assistant.

***Walking the dog:*** I'm waiting at the little railway station in Castlerock on the north Antrim coast. I've recently joined Out and About, an LGBT<sup>21</sup> walking group, and as soon as the train stops about twenty men get off. I don't know what Chris, the group leader, looks like but no matter, he's spotted me and comes over to give me a big hug.

'You must be Karen. We're very huggy here!' and I instantly feel welcome. Torridon has gone down very well too and is getting a lot of attention.

Chris introduces me to Jim and Gareth and a couple of others close by but already I'm struggling to remember names. Then he introduces Susan, who I hadn't noticed before.

'She's a transwoman and she's profoundly deaf. She'll be glad there's another woman here,' and he hugs her too.

Susan smiles at me broadly.

'Hello,' I say to her – I don't know if she lip-reads or not – and she nods and smiles back.

We've only been walking for about five minutes when Susan takes Torridon's lead out of my hand and walks along with her, walking just a little apart from the others. Torridon is trotting alongside Susan quite happily so I take the opportunity to talk to some of the guys, although I notice that Susan often gives a thumbs-up sign and points to the dog. After a while, Susan hands me back the lead and, as we're now in the fields, I let Torridon off the leash.

By now the group has strung out a little and Torridon romps around, running up and down to make sure we're all together, adopting the whole group as her companions. After a while we get to Mussenden Temple, built by the Bishop of Derry in 1785. Then we rest for a while.

'It's interesting to note Susan's interaction with Torridon.' I turn around to reply to Chris but see him looking over to where Susan and Torridon are together by a small dry-stone wall. I look over too. Susan waves at me to come over and, writing in a small notebook, asks me to take her photo. I take several but the one that catches my eye is where Susan and Torridon are gazing at each.

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<sup>21</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.



**Figure 9 Susan and Torridon communicate**

### ***Trusting Torridon***

There is a plethora of research to support the argument that dogs encourage social interaction (*cf* Messent 1983; Wood J. et al. 2007; Hart et al. 1987), and of the importance of eye contact between humans and dogs (*cf* Sanders 2003; Haraway 2008; Horowitz 2009). Torridon has striking hazel eyes set off by her golden (wheaten) fur and when she holds you in her gaze it can be very arresting, it feels deeply communicative. When I went on the next walk with Out and About, Susan took Torridon's lead again and we talked to each other through gestures. On the train back to Belfast she told me about fleeing her home country, where to be gay or transgender could lead to fatal consequences, and then of travelling through Europe, seeking acceptance as a transwoman, all communicated through written notes with the most sensitive information scribbled out as soon as I read it. This scribbling out is interesting. In all of the other encounters with strangers described in this chapter, the mode of communication is oral language, which is fleeting and can be easily



forgotten. But verbal speech is not available to Susan so maybe when she writes down sensitive information she needs to scribble it out so that there is no trace. Going back to the photograph, where Susan and Torridon are gazing at each other, I posit that the communicative trust established between them had a positive spin-off for me: Susan was able to trust me *more easily* because she trusted Torridon, and although she scribbled out her words, she did nevertheless share them with me.

Sztompka (1999) suggests that the idea of trust is based, in part, on prediction and control. The future is uncertain and the more uncertain it is, the less control we have. Therefore, some decisions are a leap of faith. This is particularly the case when we first meet someone. Because we have not met them before, we use our experience of other people and the context we are in to make judgements on the predictability of something good or bad happening as a result of our interaction with someone. In fieldwork, trust between anthropologist and research participant is something that can develop over time:

Trustful and intimate relations have always been important in anthropological fieldwork; intimate relations represent 'depth', that is, closeness and intensiveness in field relations, which the discipline regards as a prerequisite for ethnographic description of high quality.

(Talle 2012:112)

But if anthropological fieldwork is focused on fleeting encounters with strangers, this depth is not attainable – in such short engagements – and one needs to rely on other means to appear trustworthy to someone. When dogs are used in animal-assisted therapy, the trust that develops between the client and the therapist is predicated on the presence of the dog (Chandler 2001). I argue that having a friendly and attractive dog is one means of quickly establishing trust, not only between dog and stranger but also between anthropologist and stranger – if I have a friendly dog then maybe I am friendly too.

Another example of how Torridon helped to develop a trusting relationship occurred with my neighbours: not only with Nellie who lived next door but also with a gang of children who played in the street. They were led by Angela, a mature and

affectionate five-year-old, and were devoted to the dog. They would knock on the door to ask if Torridon was coming out to play, take turns (and sometimes squabble about) walking her up and down the street, and they hung around Torridon's neck while she stood there wagging her tail. Angela and Torridon together facilitated and mediated the relationship between Angela's mother and me. Initially, the mother did not speak to me but focused on Angela and the dog. Then she began to smile. Once her daughter established a mutual fun-based relationship with Torridon she spoke to me directly.



**Figure 10 Torridon and chums**

### **Torridon The Cosmopolitan Dog**

Cosmopolitanism, according to Ulrich Beck (2002), is understanding people as being situated at one and the same time in the global world, the cosmos, and in the local

world, the polis: what unites us is our common humanity which can encompass local differences. Thus, a cosmopolitan as a citizen of the world recognises the sameness in others while acknowledging the difference, although as Gay y Blasco (2010) notes, cosmopolitanism is a flexible and elusive term. For example, Saito argues that cosmopolitans are the mediators in an ANT network, who allow locals 'to increase their openness to foreign others' and who enable other members of a group 'to reexamine their outgroup prejudices' (2011:138). Applying Saito to the encounter with the children in Milltown Cemetery on Easter Sunday, Torridon could be seen as a cosmopolitan dog, enabling the other group members (particularly the adults) to transcend the implications of a Brit at a republican ceremony. But can one extend the notion of cosmopolitanism to animals?

Nigel Rapport has written extensively on cosmopolitanism (cf Rapport 2007, 2010, 2012a; Amit and Rapport 2002). His focus is on the (human) individual, who is at one and the same time rooted in the local and part of the global, an embodiment of the universally human. Each person is simultaneously Someone, a unique individual, and also Anyone, a universal human being. I suggest that Torridon engages simultaneously with Someone and Anyone. For example, from Torridon's perspective Susan is Someone, a unique individual like no other, and she understands this in the main by her superior sense of smell: Torridon will be able to detect the minute physiological cues that make Susan herself and no-one else. At the same time, Torridon is engaging with Anyone, a human being who gives her pleasure and pats her like so many others do. Meanwhile from Susan's perspective, her interaction with Torridon is not *defined* by the social, political, sexual, disabled or gendered categories that she chooses or has ascribed to her, since those categories are meaningless to the dog. With Torridon, what is fundamental to her individuality – her being Someone – is simply that she is Anyone, *any* human being. Torridon as a cosmopolitan actor is responsible for including Susan within the globally human irrespective of her chosen way of being a Someone.

There is a growing interest in cosmopolitanism in human-animal studies (Nagai 2015). But Schaffner and Wardle (2017) note that Kantian cosmopolitanism is an anthropocentric project: a cosmopolitan is a citizen of the *cosmos* and the *polis* – a citizen of the world. So how could this apply to animals? They are certainly of the

world but are they citizens? This depends on how one defines the term. One definition is that a citizen has rights that derive from being born in a particular place. Animals have some rights in some countries where it is a human crime to be cruel to them. Even though animals are not regarded as persons in a legal sense, animal personhood has been recognized by several authors (*cf.* Knight 2005; Kohn 2007). Glendinning (2015) goes beyond an animal rights argument to suggest that animals are political beings and that ‘cosmopolitan’ denotes something that is found in most parts of the world; thus he argues that all animals are cosmopolitan. However, I have a problem with this all-encompassing definition, since if everyone – human and animal – is cosmopolitan, then it becomes a meaningless tool for analysis, since it is not possible to define what it is by what it is not (see Hannerz 1990).

Jalais (2008) argues that tigers are cosmopolitan because they are ubiquitous in many different places in the world (real tigers, toy tigers, tigers as symbols for conservation), while Barua argues that elephants are cosmopolitan because they link together an assemblage of ‘diverse and far-flung epistemic communities’, such as government-sponsored wildlife tourism, NGO-funded wildlife conservation, and locals’ relationships with domesticated elephants or, in the wild, with destructive and marauding elephants (2014:560). Meanwhile Lynn (2002) makes a case for cosmopolitan wolves because a moral cosmopolitan worldview sees wolves as having the same rights to inhabit the landscape as humans.

However, all of these animals – Jalais’ tigers, Barua’s elephants and Lynn’s wolves – are deemed to be cosmopolitan because human-symbolic meaning has been superimposed upon them, in much the same way as I have done by suggesting that Torridon is unaware of the social and political categories to which Susan may be allocated. But is it at all possible that Torridon could be cosmopolitan in her own right? Could she have her own dog-constructed categories of humans and other animals, whereby she acknowledges and embraces the foreignness and otherness of her interlocutors while recognising a universal animality, both members of the class *Mammalia*? Haraway notes that communication ‘across irreducible difference’ matters more than method between companion species (2003:49). Torridon and Susan could be seen to communicate across the irreducible difference of Susan’s profound deafness in a shared, animal way: their communication *has* to be non-

verbal because Torridon cannot speak and Susan cannot hear. Their communication is also less complex relationally than it would be for human-to-human non-verbal communication, as Torridon is unaware of the human-constructed categories of sex, gender and so on. This is a cosmopolitan engagement between Susan and Torridon that is both local and global, individual and generic: a form of cosmopolitan politesse (Rapport 2012a), which invites and recognises Anyone as a potential interlocutor and equal other. When Emmanuel Levinas (1990) was a prisoner of war, a stray dog in the labour camp, whom he named 'Bobby', recognised Levinas's humanity in a way the Nazis did not, leading Clark to suggest that animals are capable of treating others '*like humans*' (2004:43, original emphasis); in other words as Anyone. Samantha Hurn (2015) sees cosmopolitanism as a moral project and she extends this to animals, recognising that although animals will not share a human moral compass they do develop a moral sensibility of their own, citing her work with baboons. I suggest that both Susan and Torridon are cosmopolitan – albeit that Torridon's dog-constructed categories, built maybe around smell or willingness to engage, indicate that she does not embrace everyone, as the next walk shows.

***Walking the dog:*** I'm taking a break from fieldwork. Torridon and my partner and I are walking along the River Thames in London towards Barnes village where we find a nice café and sit outside in the sunshine. Torridon still attracts attention, fieldwork or not, and a woman, maybe in her mid-40s, crosses the street to talk to the dog. She's wearing jeans and a blouse, has a silken scarf around her neck and bangles on one wrist. She doesn't look at all out of place here, even though she's pushing a large wheeled crate – the sort that market-traders might use to move stock around – loaded with suitcases and plastic-covered bales of something unseen. The woman stops to pat Torridon and just at this moment two people on the next table speak to me.

'What a lovely dog. What sort of dog is she?' and I spend the next few minutes chatting to them. In the meantime, the other woman says goodbye and moves off.

Later that evening my partner asks me a question.

'Did you notice Torridon's behaviour around that woman in Barnes?'

### ***Torridon's Tail***

I had not noticed anything but apparently Torridon's tail had been low between her legs and tucked right up under her body, a sign usually seen only when she has to suffer the indignity of a bath. This prompted me to recall that I had thought at the time that there was something unusual about this woman, a fleeting, largely subconscious sensation but it was instantly dismissed: there were no outward signs to support the feeling, it was very likely to be one of the myriad momentary encounters that Torridon engenders, and I was not on fieldwork (although this demonstrates Vered Amit's (2000) point that the geographic concepts of 'field' and 'home' are not always clear cut). Torridon had clearly been uncomfortable: she is usually friendly when people pat her. She must have detected something that she did not like. She must have decided that the woman was not someone she could be friendly with, despite the woman's outward appearances as perceived by me. Torridon was attached to the table by a lead at the time and did not have the opportunity to move away, so it is difficult to discern whether she transcended her own dog-categorisation of the woman by staying put when she did not want to. If cosmopolitanism is about acknowledging *and accepting* difference, it is difficult to tell, through this example, whether or not Torridon was a cosmopolitan dog.

Nevertheless, the encounter between Torridon and the woman in Barnes yielded methodological knowledge for me. It taught me to pay even more attention to Torridon when – in my frame of reference – she is engaged as my fieldwork assistant. I do not know why Torridon tucked her tail under her body that day in Barnes, or why she wrapped herself around Jane's legs that day by the River Lagan, but in doing so she responded to these two people in a way that she had not responded to others. In my fieldnotes I merely recorded Torridon's unusual behaviour, but *post facto* analysis suggests that this should have alerted me to be hyper-observant and maybe more enquiring. As Donna Haraway notes, a dog's judgement 'can sometimes be better than a human's on the job' (2003:39). Clearly on this occasion Torridon was a better ethnographer than I was.

## Teamwork

In the field, Torridon and I work as a team with complementary skills. Torridon initiates encounters and, I suggest, can seek out people willing to engage with us, while I can move a conversation about her onto other topics or develop longer-term relationships with people who are just as interested in the dog (sometimes more so) as they are with me. Human-animal teams are common of course – from carrier pigeons to sniffer dogs and everything in between – and close human/animal connections develop, described by Haraway as ‘becoming-with’ (2008:16). But to make a wider case for a dog as part of an ethnographic team, the method has to be applicable elsewhere and to work with another dog. There must be something specific that a dog offers that a human cannot do (or do easily) alone. To consider this I have pondered a counter-factual: What would it be like if I had a different dog? Or no dog? Or someone else was walking Torridon? And what are the canine qualities that Torridon contributes to this anthropological endeavour?

The opportunity to consider a different dog occurred in London, when my partner and I were walking Torridon up from the River Thames in Hammersmith past a large council estate. A woman with an English Bull Terrier walked towards us and Torridon greeted the dog, which was on a short lead but was friendly. We stopped to stroke the terrier and to talk to the owner, and she was *really* grateful; so many people cross the street to avoid her and the dog – exactly opposite to the behaviour I experience. A dog perceived to be an aggressive dog would make a poor research assistant for collecting stories. Halfway through my Belfast fieldwork, Torridon went to the groomers and was (unintentionally) clipped very short. I was devastated because she no longer looked like herself but, wanting to be a good anthropologist, I decided to observe whether it made a difference to people interacting with her. It did. Far fewer random strangers stopped to stroke her. Torridon did not look like an interesting, shaggy dog anymore, just a mutt with a bad haircut. As her fur grew again, so did her admirers. This suggests that a research assistant dog needs to look cute or unusual. When walking Torridon in Belfast I felt highly visible on the end of the lead, but when I walked those same streets alone very few people paid attention to me, and no stranger stopped me to talk. There is no doubt that the (right kind of) dog increases the number of contacts. This is confirmed in a 1979 study of dogs and

owners in Hyde Park, London (and four other sites in England) where those with dogs spoke more frequently with strangers, and had longer exchanges with them, than those without dogs (Messent 1983). It is different again when someone else walks Torridon. My nephew is a tall, lanky 20-year-old. Whenever he walked Torridon in Belfast, he was only occasionally asked what kind of dog she was and no one engaged him in conversation. But then he was not looking to engage with them either.

So perhaps it is Torridon's particular breed and my desire to work with her in the (dog-friendly) field that leads to good teamwork. The personality traits of a Wheaten Terrier certainly lend themselves to this endeavour, described as 'lively, inquisitive and exuberant', 'kisses to express affection and delight to anyone', 'attached to the whole household not just one person', 'gets along with young and old', and 'adapts to city and country environments' (Soft-Coated Wheaten Terrier Club of Great Britain n.d.). Most of these qualities are good for anthropologists too.

### ***Torridon As Research Assistant***

If other animals are conscious beings, who may exhibit some form of (albeit rudimentary) culture, then the move to incorporate them as actors in ethnographic research and anthropological theory appears plausible at least.

(Hurn 2012:207)

I have argued that my dog has assisted me in fieldwork not only by enabling contact with people, but also by eliciting information that would not otherwise be revealed through the connection she establishes with strangers. In anthrozoology, the focus for anthropological study is on the interactions between human and non-human animals (de Mello 2012) as a way to understand one of the diverse manifestations of what it is to be human (Hurn 2010). In his work on the relationship between Mongolian horses and their owners, Robin Irvine describes how one horse and one man learn from each other through the process of taming and preparing the horse



for racing, suggesting they are 'subjects modifying each other; becoming something novel together' (2014:78). As an ethnographic team, Torridon and I became something novel together. I do not believe my encounter with the boys in the Bog Meadows would have happened without the presence of the dogs or that Susan and Jane would have shared information with me so quickly had Torridon not enabled the relationship.

However, this does not always happen. People who do not like dogs will avoid us, or others may be in a hurry and can only afford a few moments of canine connection. Sometimes Torridon undiplomatically breaches dog-walking etiquette and this may have a consequent effect on my relationship with others. For example, in one dog-walking group we were never really accepted by the leader, who was polite but reserved and incurious about my role as a researcher. Meanwhile, Torridon kept stealing her Jack Russell's flying ring toy. I assume that she considered (quite rightly) that dog disobedience and my culpability in this were far more important than any fancy research intentions I had. When I first began my fieldwork, any conversations I had with strangers with Torridon present focused only on her and I had to learn to move the conversation on, such as by asking if they had a dog, and then move it along again to non-dog matters: this sets the humans down particular paths of communication.

## **Conclusion**

My empirical data offers many examples to illustrate that, as my research assistant, Torridon increases my contact with strangers, many of whom go out of their way to make contact with her. Both Kristen Ghodsee and Kate Swanson have written about their pet dogs in a fieldwork context. Ghodsee (2006) took her two Bassett Hounds to Sofia in Bulgaria and although she describes some of the difficulties of pet dogs in the field and people's reactions to them, it appears the dogs' role was only as her companions, and the difficulties she encountered led to her regretting their presence in the field. Swanson (2008) on the other hand took her Rottweiler-cross (named Kiva) as a companion animal but the dog soon became integral to Swanson's fieldwork methods and she explicitly refers to Kiva as a research assistant. Like

Ghodsee, Swanson also encountered some difficulties. She worked in a small Ecuadorian village and her research participants had a different attitude towards dogs as companions. But she also discovered that Kiva gave her excellent access to the children in the village, who would become very excited shouting 'Kiva! Kiva!' whenever they saw her. Torridon also elicited this reaction from the children in the Belfast street where I lived. But Swanson did not explore *methodologically* how or why Kiva was a successful research assistant.

My major focus in this chapter has been on analyzing how Torridon-as-method works through four different theoretical models. First, I explored a bio-psycho-social model, linking a dog's sense of smell to human well-being and human interaction. However, this did not adequately explain why Torridon wrapped herself around Jane's legs. Second, I considered a political model (creative ambiguity) whereby, in an ethnographic team, human ambiguity can be offset by the opportunities to interact that a dog creates. This has a certain resonance in Northern Ireland but I question the wider applicability of this analysis. Third was actor-network theory to show how the assemblage of people, dog and objects works together in the moment. But I found this lacking as a complete explanation. I argued that not all actants are equal and that Torridon was more deserving of analysis than the other members of the network. Finally, I explored cosmopolitanism to argue that Torridon transcends human-constructed categories to recognise the universal animal but I felt less confident about whether she transcended her own dog-constructed categories of humans. Although each theoretical explanation has shed some light as to how and why Torridon works as my research assistant, none has done so exclusively. Maybe it is reductionist to think that only one explanation will do and it is only the assemblage of explanations that illuminates. Maybe Torridon is a sniffing, empathetic, cosmopolitan actant fostering serendipity and establishing trust in the numerous transient encounters that we have. This recalls Rapport's edifying anthropology where he suggests that epistemic diversity is necessary to understand human life because 'reality is multiple' and thus its 'realistic representation might eschew any singular, authoritative framing' (1997:191).

I also aimed to give the reader, through descriptions of walking in the city, a sense of the everydayness of stranger-interaction that urban life engenders, and

argue that much can be learnt from these fleeting encounters through the plethora of stories that people told me. Although I could have walked the streets alone, Torridon fostered the dynamic interconnectedness that Leach (1967) urged upon anthropologists. And finally, I make the somewhat bold assertion that Torridon was my research assistant not only because she introduced me to many people, but also because her presence brought forth stories that would not have been told to me without her, since the trusting relationship people struck up with her transferred to a trusting relationship with me. I am not suggesting that trust was solely down to Torridon or that this ethnographic team is a relationship of equals. I am unable to get inside Torridon's mind but I feel confident suggesting she has no idea she is my research assistant – for her a walk is a walk and adoration is easily come by. However, we do have a close bond and just as she is able to detect and act upon olfactory and other sensory information with strangers, she will be able to do that even more effectively with me. Over time, as our becoming-with evolves and we learn to interpret each other's communication more accurately, our fieldwork togetherness should become more effective.

This chapter has focused on fleeting encounters with random strangers that I have suggested characterizes urban life and urban social exchange. My empirical data offers many examples to illustrate that, as my research assistant, Torridon *increases* my contact with strangers notwithstanding, many of whom go out of their way to make contact with her. In the next chapter I turn my attention to a different kind of encounter and explore storytelling in more detail.

## Chapter Three

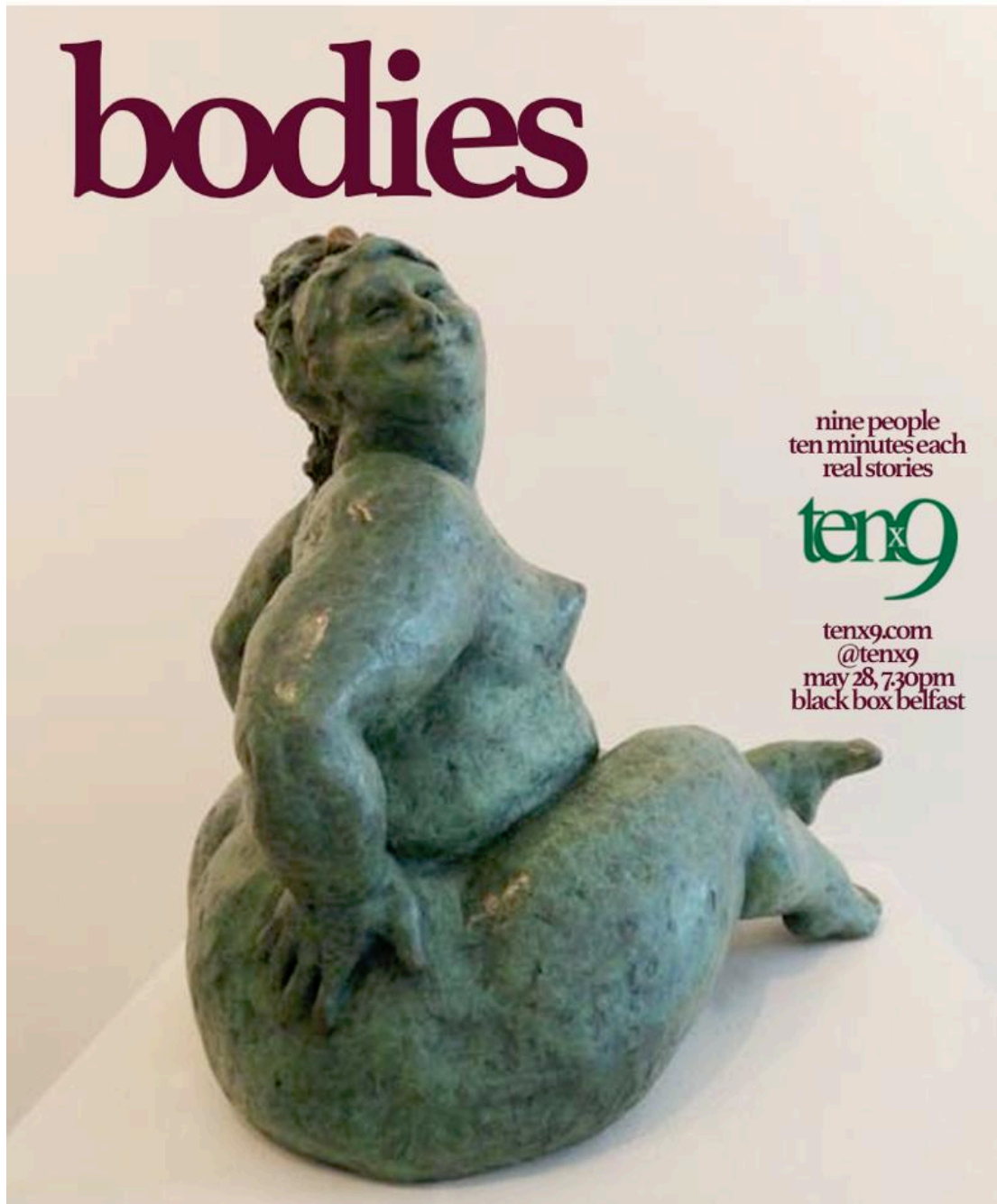
### TEN BY NINE

#### Personal Storytelling In Public

The queue is snaking down the pavement and spilling into the narrow, cobbled road of Hill Street, deep in the heart of artsy, bohemian Belfast. Yes, I did say 'bohemian'... look around you at the regenerated Cathedral Quarter with its trendy coffee shops and restaurants and full-to-burstin' bars, home to the busy Ulster University campus and the Metropolitan Arts Centre, known affectionately as 'The Mac' and built just a few years ago, with a reputation for staging edgy, contemporary theatre. Look! There's the Amavi café with a rainbow flag above the door, that's a recent arrival in Donegall Street, just down the road from the Kremlin nightclub, a stalwart of the gay scene for the last fifteen years or so. The photographers' gallery, Belfast Exposed, has been in this street for years too. We're outside St Anne's Cathedral now, with its classical Romanesque architecture and that modern, and controversial, 'Spire of Hope' looking like a giant silver toothpick stabbing the skyline. On Culture Night (when Belfast's artsy side is celebrated) there were four drag queens posing for photos on the Cathedral steps – and the world did not cave in. Over there is Writer's Square, where lines of poetry are inscribed in the paving slabs. 'Bohemian' means socially unconventional, so in comparison to the rest of the city....

On Hill Street, the queue's getting longer. There's still a good fifteen minutes to go before the doors of the Black Box open – word has gotten around about Ten By Nine you see (or Tenx9 as it's known): words like 'Brilliant stories!', 'Great craic!', and 'Free night out!' It moved out of the small cosy bar into the larger theatre space a few months ago, but you still have to get there early to get a good seat. Most of the people in the queue seem to be with friends, laughing and joshing, creating an effervescence of anticipation. A blonde woman in front of me is reading from a sheet of paper... I wonder if she's a storyteller?

At last! The doors open and we file in. It's quite dark inside until you get used to the half-light penumbra from the bar revealing small round tables, plain chairs and a screen reminding the audience of the theme for the night... Bodies.



**Figure 11 Promotional image for 'Bodies' at Tenx9**

People bustle about, greeting friends, buying drinks and settling into seats, and then Paul and Pádraig come to the microphone and welcome us all. Paul explains:

Tenx9 is a storytelling evening where nine people have up to ten minutes to tell a true story from their life. And when the ten minutes are up [Honk! Honk!] we have a lovely comedy sound effect.

There's a gentle reminder of the few rules – the stories must be true and personal – and the audience is asked to be respectful. Pádraig's pleased: several of tonight's storytellers are first-timers, but first up, we've listened to her before, please welcome... Roisin. Applause greets her as she moves to the front and turns to face the audience. She stands quietly for a few seconds (there's a calming stillness about her) then she begins to tell her story...

When I was seventeen I desperately wanted to do Fine Art at the Art College in Belfast, go to the Big City from my small country town, but I needed a crash course in drawing so I signed up for a life class at the local college. As I walked into the room all the other students were busy setting up their easels, talking animatedly to each other. Would I ever fit in with these people? I so wanted to. Fionnuala, a middle-aged life model draped in a kaftan, sat on a plinth waiting patiently and, in doing so, somehow put me at ease. After a few words of introduction from the life-drawing master, she slipped off her robe to reveal a body beautifully lined with life, stretch marks on her breasts and belly, neither elegant nor poised but an older woman completely comfortable in her skin. I admired her confidence and began to draw.

Roisin went on to tell how, when she came to Belfast Art College in the 1970s, the life drawing classroom became hugely important to her – she was there early in the morning and late at night, learning about drawing, learning about life. Her horizons expanded, 'life at art college was pure freedom,' as the bright lights of the big city brought independence and anonymity, qualities of the city that she loves to this day, because she never went back to live in County Tyrone where she grew up, where everyone knew her: 'I embraced Belfast with all my teenage desire to be known for myself and not my family history.'

At Tenx9 there is no deconstruction of the stories once told, no questions asked, just applause followed by the next storyteller. The stories that followed that night were about getting a tattoo, living with ovarian cancer, and drunkenly skinny-dipping in a lake under an African night sky; of the difficulty in peeing in public, of a sister who nearly died, and of a doctor who had no bedside manner; a story of an anorexic obsession with food, and a story of transgressions that turned a nude life

model into a naked man with an enormous penis. Some of the stories were funny, others were poignant; some storytellers were self-deprecating, others displayed self-confidence, and many shared their vulnerability. The audience was receptive and respectful, sometimes laughing heartily, sometimes listening in silence, always applauding warmly. There was a feeling of togetherness in the room, of belonging, of sharing the joys and pains of everyday life. And, interestingly for me, although there were tales of troubles told, there were no Troubles Tales told.

But what inspires people to tell stories, particularly those that expose their vulnerabilities? This chapter explores some of the stories told at Tenx9 and I argue that, through personal storytelling and the *communitas* that this engenders, Tenx9 opens up a privileged space that allows people to share the joys and woes of their everyday lives. In the process people narrate a picture of life in Belfast that challenges and transcends the Troubled grand narratives that prevail in the city. Moreover, the juxtaposition of stories – funny and sad, profound and quotidian – reflects the existential disorderliness of our lives that we manage through our narratives.

I showcase a range of personal stories: these are a small but representative sample of the many told at Tenx9. The room in the Black Box where the evening is hosted holds two hundred people at full capacity and it is at full capacity every month. Although many who attend are regulars, there are always new people in the audience and new storytellers at the front and even those who are regular storytellers will not know everyone in the room. Thus, every month, stories are being told to strangers. But this is a different kind of stranger from those we encountered in Chapter Two, where the connections between my interlocutors and me were mostly chance meetings, and most of the stories told were short and superficial (although, as I have argued, this does not mean they are trivial). Diken (1998) asserts that there are degrees of strangeness and at Tenx9 the figure of the stranger is both known and unknown. On an individual level, one person may not have met another one before, but as I explore later in the chapter, the *communitas* that is experienced at Tenx9 means that the unknown stranger is one of us, a Ten-By-Niner one might say, a stranger with whom it is much easier to share confidences (Schuetz 1944; Simmel 1950). This affords us a different glimpse ‘on the private lives of individuals’ (Davis 1959:160) to those we encounter on the street corner, where people meet by

chance. At Tenx9, audience member *seek out* these strangers, and give up their personal time to listen to the life of another urban individual.

Although the stories at Tenx9 are performed in front of an audience, I do not explore performance in this chapter because that is addressed in Chapter Five. As indicated in the Introduction, there are many theoretical overlaps to the data presented in this dissertation. Here I am interested in the content of the stories.

### **A Note On Method And On Representation Of The Stories**

My primary research methods with regard to Tenx9 were of participant observation and interviewing. Participant observation is widely understood to be the defining method of anthropological fieldwork (Bernard 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). However, Wolcott (2005) notes that it is a somewhat all-encompassing term, more of a strategy than a method. To clarify what participant observation means to me, I attended the monthly Tenx9 storytelling night during my fieldwork in Belfast to listen to the stories and observe the proceedings, and I participated both as an audience member and as a storyteller. Tenx9 also has a website that includes a short promotional video, a Facebook page, and an active Twitter account, and I have sometimes drawn on these sources too (Tenx9 n.d. a., Tenx9 n.d. b). Although Tenx9 is held in a public venue, and entry is free and open to all, video or audio recording the stories by audience members on the night is not allowed. Therefore, the stories recreated and the insights developed in this chapter are taken from fieldnotes of several Tenx9 evenings and from the subsequent recorded interviews I had with many of the storytellers.

Interviewing covers a wide range of practices. For example, an interview can be very structured with preset questions or it can be a semi- or unstructured dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. It may be audio- or video- recorded or the interviewer may take notes, during or afterwards; and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee can be formal or informal (Burgess 2000). Jonathan Skinner (2012) cites a long history of anthropologists using interviews as a method and he argues that it should be seen as a part of, not apart from, participant observation. This certainly resonates with me, since the interviews I conducted were on a continuum of interactions with people. For example, observations, conversations and my initial thoughts about what was happening would be recorded



in my fieldnotes, email exchanges with people were archived and the interviews I carried out were fairly unstructured. I wanted to explore what storytelling and Tenx9 meant to people but I rarely had prepared questions, preferring instead to use our shared participant experiences – as storytellers and audience members – to prompt and guide the interview. There was a to-and-fro of questions, comments, ideas, and reminiscences between the interviewees and me that recalls Rapport's 'talking partnerships' (Rapport 2012b; 1987). These 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 2000:102), were recorded using a small lapel microphone and an unobtrusive digital voice recorder that could be slipped into an interviewee's pocket. Several people remarked at the end of the interview that they had forgotten that the equipment was there. Nevertheless, all gave permission to use the data, and any quotations taken from interviews are verbatim, other than removing space-filler utterances, since I am interested in the general content of the interviews not a linguistic conversational analysis.

The founders of Tenx9, Paul Doran and Pádraig Ó Tuama, were aware of my research from the beginning and generously assisted me not only by being interviewed themselves but also by acting as brokers for me to gain access to other storytellers and, in some instances, to gain permissions to use their stories. As each story told on the night lasts for ten minutes, those represented in the chapter are short extracts. Almost all of the storytellers read from a prepared text, so the written-language style of the recreated stories is authentic and I have presented their stories in the first person singular to capture something of their individual voices. However, as my aesthetic reproduction of ethnographic data differs throughout this dissertation, I examine writing style in the Conclusion, rather than in this chapter.

Some storytellers gave permission for me to use their own names while others preferred me to use a pseudonym. I have not differentiated them in the text: the importance of names here is most relevant for those who claim them, not for those who read about them. This is true of the other chapters too.

Anyone can tell a story at Tenx9, indeed new storytellers are positively encouraged, so I too told a story. Although my story is not the subject of this chapter, my participation as a storyteller as well as an audience member gave me a particular insight into public, personal storytelling and it gave me a means to connect with the people I interviewed, some of whom had heard me speak.

## Storytelling As A Local-Cultural Symbolic Form

When I met Roisin at the Art College to talk to her about storytelling she told me she had always been a creative person – painting, drawing, making jewellery, writing fiction (mainly short stories) – so she felt naturally drawn to the concept of Tenx9. Once there, she experienced something quite powerful, as she explains here:

When you're writing something about yourself that's real, you go back to that time and place. You do. You go straight back. You feel as you felt at that age. You can nearly smell what you smelt at that time. You relive it. But the *telling* of something, there's something very different about that. It has a really powerful impact on a person. It's the declaration of something. (...) I'm an introvert: standing up in front of an audience is terrifying for me. My leg shakes and I have to move ever so slightly from one foot to the other to stop it. But [telling stories] is something I really want to do. I'm so eager to tell them, and they're... they're just coming out of me. I think I would have been satisfied just writing the story, even if it had never been read, until I went to Tenx9 and I thought, Wow! There is something really powerful going on here. I've been going [for nine months] and I'm still not at the bottom of it, but there is something incredibly powerful about standing up and telling something of yourself.

Roisin began our interview by telling me about the culture and history of the storyteller in Ireland, where the seanchaí (pronounced *shan*-a-kee) would come round to people's homes: 'You'd hear that the storyteller was coming in the area and you would wait with baited breath and families would gather'. Many other people I spoke to at Tenx9 placed their storytelling in this historical and social context. The seanchaí was usually a man, although not exclusively so (Ó Duilearga 1942; Harvey 1989), who either wandered from place to place telling folktales and bringing news from towns and villages or, more often, was a local person known as 'the bard of the house' (Zimmerman 2001:82), who would gather people around them at the fireside

to tell stories. The seanchaí was in great demand for wakes and for céilithe<sup>22</sup> [plural, pronounced *kay-li-huh*], evenings of music, dance and storytelling (Ó Súilleabháin 1973). The storytelling tradition continues to this day, as Cashman (2011) identifies in a small village on the Northern Irish border. Telling stories at wakes and céilithe is an important means of establishing both community and personal identity: by ‘taking stock of themselves through storytelling – and particularly through anecdotes – [people] define who they have been, who they are, and who they can be’ (Cashman 2011:255).

Roisin also told me about the therapeutic effect, for her, of telling and listening to true stories. Storytelling as a form of healing is widely acknowledged (*cf.* Frank 1995; Rosenthal 2003; Mullet et al. 2013; Aho 2014) and has been employed in Northern Ireland in post-conflict reconciliation (Healing Through Remembering 2005; Senehi 2009; Weighofer 2014). The meta-narrative here is of storytelling as a force for good, but Hackett and Rolston question that storytelling is unproblematic in peace and reconciliation initiatives, noting that although many victims regard storytelling as essential, often people ‘do not get to hear stories from other groups or reject out of hand the validity of those stories’ (2009:370). As mentioned, the stories I heard told at Tenx9 were not Troubles stories but there were some painful tales, and all of the people I spoke to felt that storytelling was beneficial to both teller and hearer; I explore this in more detail later. The stories told at Tenx9 were stories of everyday lives and in the context of the historical and social role of storytelling in Northern Ireland, Tenx9 becomes a modern version of the storytelling céilí, updating and yet at the same time continuing this local cultural-symbolic form of communication.

## **Narrative Identity**

Richard Kearney says that stories ‘are what make our life worth living. They are what make our condition *human*’ (Kearney 2002:3, original emphasis). Nor is he the only

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<sup>22</sup> There are several spellings of both seanchaí and céilí (singular) depending on whether it is Scottish or Irish Gaelic, and old or reformed spelling. I have chosen the modern Irish Gaelic spelling.

commentator to see narrative as an inherently human activity (cf. Hardy 1968; Kerby 1991; Ochs and Capps 2001; Jackson 2006). For Barthes, narrative is so ubiquitous that 'it is simply there, like life itself' (1993:252). According to Michael Jackson, storytelling enables us to share our private world with others, it is a way to transmit the meaning we ascribe to events, and how we sustain 'a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (2006:15), qualities that are so essential to being human that Jackson refers to it as the narrative *imperative*. Or, as Roisin articulates it, stories are just coming out of her.

To tell a story about oneself – even if only to oneself – is to link events in a coherent fashion that life rarely orders for us. Life experiences happen in a disorderly manner, with many unconnected things happening simultaneously, and the meaning of something is not always immediately apparent. Even birth and death are not a natural beginning and ending to a life story, since at birth we are thrust 'into the midst' (Kermode 2000:7) where others, whose lives are already in full swing, may have thought and talked about our imminent arrival, and after death others may still recall and recount our narrative life. Therefore, we need 'fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives' (Kermode 2000:7). A story puts together only those events or facts or comments that are relative to the plot, a (usually) linear narrative thread. This enables us to view the beginning through the prism of the ending and thus to make meaning out of these once-disorderly events, giving us a sense of empowerment since 'the act of sharing stories helps us to create a world that is more than the sum of its individual parts' (Jackson 2013:170).

For example, Roisin wants to go to Art College, she undertakes a preparatory course and then moves to Belfast – the story has a beginning, middle and end and no extraneous events are described. But Roisin also ascribes meaning to these experiences: Fionnuala's poise instils confidence in her, and at Art College, where she is free of the familial yoke, Roisin can express herself as she chooses. The very act of putting together these events creates something new – a story – that is, for Roisin, more meaningful than the individual events alone. It is not just the facts of history that are important but the truths and meanings that are revealed through the story (Kearney 2002). Roisin refers to it as 'reclaiming your own history, getting more understanding about things I'd forgotten and why things happened'. Richard Kearney calls this a narrative identity:

When someone asks *who* you are, you tell your story. That is, you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime.

(Kearney 2002:4, original emphasis)

By linking events together in a coherent way, stories enable us to make sense of the abstract notion of time stretching infinitely back to the past and forward to the future. Our stories put time on a human scale: a day, a year, a life span. Meanwhile, narrative structure brings concord to existential disorder by attaching synthesis to a sequence of events they do not actually have; a story 're-describes the world... *as if* it were what... it is not' (Carr 1991:14-15, original emphasis).

Nuala, a storyteller at Tenx9, illustrates this last point. She had struggled to get her weight under control so when she succeeded she rewarded herself with a tattoo from the top of her thigh to her armpit. She designed the tattoo herself and described how she chose a tattooist and about her anxieties of getting it done. Serious matters... but her story was very funny. As she said to me:

I can look back on it now and see the humour in it. My friend Ian said to me "I've heard every bit of that story individually but hearing it altogether it's hilarious!" And it is funny whenever you put it together.

By re-describing her journey towards getting a tattoo, she tells a story *as if* it was amusing all along and through this she is empowered in the retelling. I asked Nuala what she liked about Tenx9 and why she told stories:

The first [Tenx9] I went to, the theme was 'Belfast'. And it was just brilliant. I loved it. It's just such a different evening. And it's easy entertainment. And like, you know you'll have a good night out that's not just about drinking. [After the next Tenx9 evening] I went over to Paul

and I was like, 'what's the craic about telling a story? How do you get signed up for it or whatever?' I knew it was something I wanted to do. So I said, 'that's grand, sign me up.' But shortly before that I'd gone for a promotion in work and I was interviewed in London [but] my interview was awful. It really threw me, I didn't answer well at all. So that kind of made me want to do the Tenx9 stories as well, to kind of build my confidence and, it's kinda like, if I can get up and tell a story in front of a room full of people, well then an interview shouldn't bother me. So I've told three Tenx9 stories now and the last time I knew my interview was coming up. And I got it! I was saying to Paul last week I really do think Tenx9 helped. (...) I love telling stories because, even in work it's kinda, you know, it's like, you'll never guess what happened to me this weekend!

Here Nuala articulates the fun to be had in storytelling and hints at its empowering quality through her increased confidence in interviews. But she also gestures towards the narrative structures that are implicit in the stories we tell.

### **Narrative Structure And Meaning-Making**

Christopher Booker states that stories begin with the formula 'Once upon a time', 'whether the storyteller uses it explicitly or not', and it serves 'to take us out of our present place and time into that imaginary realm where the story is to unfold' (Booker 2004:17). Nuala's 'you'll never guess what happened to me' stands in for Booker's 'once upon a time' and, because people have heard and enjoyed her stories before, it heralds another good story to come. You want to know what happens next; the 'imaginary realm' is to feel you are part of Nuala's world. Nuala is unusual among Tenx9 storytellers as she does not write her story beforehand but prefers to go in with an idea and just talk about it. However her stories still follow a typical narrative structure: they have a beginning, middle and end, a dénouement, location as to time and place etc. This narrative structure is evident in Cara's story too. At

seventeen she was the youngest storyteller at Tenx9 and the theme that night was 'Belfast'.

When I was nine, I moved into a different street and I played the game 'Belfast' with my cousins, which is when you rap the door, ring the bell and then you'd run fast! One guy that we did it on actually caught us in the act and we were running back to our house, acting all innocent, and he came up behind us and he started shouting. I've always lived in Belfast and I didn't move far from home, but I needed to because Mummy and Daddy separated. At first I thought this would be good – twice as many presents, two homes, more of this and more of that. But it wasn't like that really. I just wanted my life to get back to normal. I wrote a Confirmation prayer around that time, about getting my family back together so we'd all be happy again. I just wanted a happy ending. Actually, it was a happy ending, but not as I thought it would be then, because they're happier apart, with their new partners.

I was interested to know more about how Cara chose her story subject and how she put it together. A few months later we met one afternoon outside the Black Box:

When I went to Tenx9 the first time, I just knew I wanted to tell a story, so when 'Belfast' was announced as the next theme I thought of the game. But when I was thinking about my life in Belfast, I went back to my memory box where I found the Confirmation prayer and my diaries. When I was doing the research for the story, my Mummy was telling me more than I had actually known about it [at the time] (...) she explained more why they actually broke up. I was told some of it anyway [at the time] but whenever we would talk about it [then] Mummy would say, 'I don't want to go there, just leave it'. But, while we were researching the story, [she] was more open to me about it, and I was learning about how my Mummy and my Daddy felt. (...) I had more understanding of what went on. It was hard to put my feelings into sentences, about how I actually felt at that time, but I drafted the story then changed it a bit.

Once I'd found everything out about [the separation], it was more of a relief than anything else. I sent the story to Daddy and he said it was brilliant!

Aristotle identified the need for a connecting line for narrative events and that a 'well-constructed plot (...) will neither begin at some chance point nor end at some chance point' (Aristotle 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, cited in Ochs and Capps 2001:206). Cara's story about the game of 'Belfast' was not a chance point of entry but specifically chosen as the prologue, a way to engage her audience through a game that many of them would recognise from their own childhoods. Her main story about her parents' separation was an opportunity to understand what happened, to share her story with her parents, and then with a wider audience. Many other events will have happened at the time of this story's unfolding but Cara can corral this existential disorderliness through the plot (Carr 1991).

I will now look at how stories can help us to understand events that happen, how we can share this understanding with others through stories, and how people can relate to stories told by others to help make meaning in their own lives.

### ***Stories to help make meaning***

Building on Aristotle's analysis, Richard Kearney (2002) identifies five elements to what he calls the irrepressible art of storytelling: plot (*mythos*), re-creation (*mimesis*), release (*catharsis*), wisdom (*phronesis*), and ethics (*ethos*). These elements can all be seen in Cara's story above. The plot is linear and explains what happened, linking the events in a temporal and orderly sequence. Meanwhile, *mimesis* 're-enacts the real world of action by magnifying its essential traits' and in so doing 'remakes the world in the light of its potential truths' (Kearney 2002:131). In her story, Cara brings together what happened when she was nine with what her seventeen-year-old self knows, and in the gap between life-as-lived and life-as-retold she discovers a truth for herself, that her parents are happier apart. With this truth comes wisdom, this is a happy ending and, through the process of storytelling, there is catharsis, since it was a relief for her to make this discovery. Cara views the



beginning of her story (parental separation) through the prism of the (happy) ending and she is thus able to rework the past in the light of the present (Werbner 1991).

Kearney notes that storytelling is never neutral; 'Every narrative bears some evaluative charge regarding the events narrated and the actors featured in the narration' (Kearney 2002:155). Cara is also making a moral judgement in her story. Despite her parents' break-up being somewhat difficult at the time, she now celebrates their happiness with their new partners: a happy family need not be a nuclear family.

[W]hile narrative imagination enables us to empathise with those characters in the story who act and suffer, it also provides us with a certain aesthetic distance from which to view the events unfolding, thereby discerning 'the hidden cause of things'.

(Kearney 2002:12-13)

Cara is both a character in her story and the omniscient narrator, a party to the action but also one who maintains an aesthetic distance. It could be argued that she did not need to *tell* her story to discover the hidden cause of things; that was done through the research and the writing. However she told me that, if not for Tenx9, 'it probably would have been years and years before I found it out. If I'd even bothered'. Thus the *prospect* of telling the story was crucial and, as for the actual telling, she said: 'it was a brilliant experience!' It is this relationship, between the storyteller and the audience, which I now wish to explore and I will compare the 'telling' stage, when Cara speaks to the audience, to the 'pre-telling' stage, where she is primarily (but not exclusively) her own audience.

As Cara was researching and writing her story, although her primary audience was herself (and her mother who helped) her future audience at Tenx9 was also present, albeit in her imagination at that stage. Cara wrote with the intention of performing her story and she practiced reading it out loud. Thus her imagined audience was central to the process of developing her written story. This recalls Bakhtin's 'superaddressee', the ideal listener 'who hears from a position above self and other, and who listens sympathetically and understands justly' (Midgley

2011:155; Bakhtin 1986). Anne Enright, a Booker-prize-winning novelist,<sup>23</sup> hints at the superaddressee when she describes reading extracts from her novels to an audience: ‘a mass of readers in the dark is quite like the ideal reader, being vague in outline and yet benevolently alert’ (Enright 2008, quoted in Wulff 2008:111). However, in the preparation stage, writing for an imagined audience is different for a novelist than it was for Cara. Although successful authors are called on to do readings, a novelist’s main audience is his or her *readership*. Enright imagines writing for a single reader because reading is not a communal activity (Enright 2015), thus Enright’s superaddressee is an individual-to-individual imagining. Cara, on the other hand, was writing as a preparatory vehicle in order to *tell* her story, and she knew she would be telling it to a room full of people. Thus her superaddressees were not just present in her imagination as she was writing but would be realised in the room as she told her story. Enright can keep hold of the image of the ideal reader, since she will never face the vast majority of her readership. Cara, on the other hand, knows from the beginning that she will face her audience.

### ***Stories to convey meaning***

The imagined audience was important for Lucy too, although this evolved during the process of developing and telling her story. She went to her first Tenx9 with her daughter, Bonnie. They both enjoyed the evening and on the way home Bonnie asked her Mum if she would ever tell a story. Maybe, replied Lucy, but there was only one story she would tell and it would need to be the right time. A couple of weeks later, Bonnie talked to Pádraig and he decided, there and then, to set the theme for the next event. It was to be ‘Surprise!’ and with that, Lucy felt she could not get out of it. But she told herself that she was writing the story only for Bonnie; and only if it were OK would she tell it to others. This is the story she told:

Bonnie and I were in Eason’s stationery shop a year or so ago and she was busy buying a Valentine’s card for someone. I wondered what this boy might be like? Who has my seventeen-year-old daughter given her heart to? Will she be hurt? Will she stay safe? Who will be the right guy?

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<sup>23</sup> Enright won the Man Booker Prize for *The Gathering* (2007)

And then she'll be married... what will her kids be like? But I didn't share these anxieties. I'd offered her a lift into Belfast – she was going to deliver the card personally – and in the car she chatted about this and that but I was still preoccupied with my thoughts. I decided to ask who the card was for, casually and, I hoped, acceptingly. Bonnie paused for a moment then said, 'Mum, it's not a boy.' Well! I wasn't expecting that! I was really shocked but I also felt hugely relieved!! I thought, OK, so maybe this will not go so bad as I thought. And I felt so stupid!!! How could I not have known? Suddenly there was this dramatic shift in my story of Bonnie's life. Emotions and thoughts and alternative futures were all swirling around inside me. But the only thing I said, casually and, I hoped, acceptingly, was 'Oh. OK.' And as I dropped her off she waved at me cheerfully through the window.

Coming out stories, as in declaring your sexuality to someone important to you, are something of a rite of passage for many people in the lesbian, gay and bisexual community: 'important touchstones in personal history (King and Noelle 2005:279; see also Rossi 2010). Plummer refers to them as '*participant stories*' (1995:60, original emphasis), but in a coming out conversation there are (at least) two participants, and these stories are rarely recorded from the point of view of the person on the receiving end. This is why Bonnie and Pádraig were keen for Lucy to tell her story; as Lucy said to me, 'Mums have an interior world too'. Lucy's private, interior world was a whirl of emotion when Bonnie came out – Shock! Relief! Astonishment! – but her public self belied this. Storytelling at Tenx9 became an opportunity to make her private world public (Jackson 2006), not just to Bonnie but to others too. As Walter Benjamin notes (in the gendered language of his time):

[E]very real story (...) contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist of a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers.

(Benjamin 2007 [1936]:86)

Lucy realised she had a hetero-dominant view of the world and had reacted almost too casually to Bonnie sharing such deeply personal information. Although she wrote the story so that Bonnie could understand why she reacted as she did, she realised it had a wider resonance. Storytelling becomes a vehicle where she can show care for others, not just her daughter. Lucy told this story twice at Tenx9, the second time was for the evening themed 'Labels', part of the Belfast Gay Pride Festival in 2014. This is when I heard her speak. She knew that, unlike Bonnie, not everyone had an easy time coming out to their parents, maybe feeling it was impossible to tell them because the parents had no inkling of what was to come. She wanted her story on that night to make a connection with imagined mothers of gay and lesbian members of the audience. She told me that she wanted to say to people 'Yes! You're right. Your parents probably don't have any idea. And they may well handle it really badly but give them a chance. Even if they get it wrong, they might manage to get it right after that'.

### ***Stories that help others to make meaning***

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.

(Benjamin 2007:87)

Caroline told stories on two different Tenx9 nights about living with ovarian cancer – one about the physicality of the disease and another of the psychological journey she had taken. Both stories were funny and positive. For example, instead of asking 'why me?' her focus was 'why not me?' – a philosophy towards life that she first encountered in Central America, as she explains:

[They are] fragile places, politically and geographically... earthquakes, volcanoes, wars (...) and the people said, 'Why wouldn't these things happen to me?' Cancer affects one in three people so why wouldn't it affect me? A lot of people spoke to me after I told both stories and I

think if you've been through something like that, and you can manage to keep your head together, then you're, well, people like hearing that because the chances are they'll be one of the one in three, or they'll be going through it with another relative.

Caroline's individual experience will have spoken to others' individual experiences: not only will a high proportion of the population develop cancer but many more people, their partners, friends and relatives, will be affected by it: as novelist Elizabeth Bowen writes, 'To have turned away from everything to one face is to find oneself face to face with everything' (1998:195). It is quite possible there were people in the audience that night that did not feel able to tell their own story of living with cancer but felt that Caroline spoke on their behalf. Thus the relationship between Caroline and the audience is one speaking to, but also for, many: my story is *your* story (third person plural). The listener becomes a 'co-owner' of the event and it is the present-tenseness of the telling/listening experience that enables this to happen (Laub 1991:57). Although one could listen to and empathise with a story on the radio, say, in the immediate presence there is an intersubjectivity that calls on all of the senses to help engender an emotional connection.

When the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence.

(Goffman, 1990:14)

Through empathy audience members can vicariously experience Caroline's psychological response to her illness and may be able to apply this directly to their own experiences. For Linda Park-Fuller (2000), it is the *mutuality* of the storytelling/hearing experience that leads to this knowing.

At Tenx9 there is a direct verbal and non-verbal interactive connection between the storyteller and the story-hearer(s): the audience can respond

immediately. For example, it is held in a large room with a bar. People can get up and walk around (although tend not to while the stories are being told), glasses sometimes clink and crisp packets rustle, sometimes the audience is quite still and silent. Thus, audience attention (or not) gives an immediate in-story verdict on how interesting or funny or boring it is and, at the beginning of every Tenx9 evening, Paul and Pádraig remind everyone of the importance of the audience in the event. It is the intersubjective relationship between storytellers and audience, the in-the-moment sharing of stories that Benjamin calls 'living immediacy' (2007:83), that is key to its success. Representing 'in-the-momentness' does present some challenges. As Pádraig recently tweeted, after an enigmatic description of a storyteller, 'you probably had to be there' (Tenx9 2017).<sup>24</sup>

To discuss this further I turn now to the concept of *communitas*.

## **Communitas**

As I have already indicated, Tenx9 is very popular. People queue for up to half an hour before the doors open and the room is at maximum capacity each month. There is no entry charge and no compulsion to buy drinks once inside and many of the stories are funny, so it is a cheap and entertaining night out. As Nuala says, it is 'a great craic', an Irish expression for good fun, which Trude (2001) identifies as the conviviality derived from the social setting, the art of conversation and storytelling, and the enjoyment of being with others. But the popularity of Tenx9 seems to be based on more than just the craic. Caroline told me that 'there's a feeling of great safety, that you're among friends and you won't be judged'. Lucy notes storytellers' willingness 'to invite you [in], to be vulnerable, to say here's a little piece of my life, my story. (...) There's a real, richness to it. The atmosphere is very warm'. Everyone I spoke to acknowledged that the feeling of trust Paul and Pádraig establish makes the evening special. This is different to the trust one has with strangers in the street (whom we met in Chapter Two) because at Tenx9 the stories shared are much more personal. The storytellers are exposing their vulnerabilities. Pádraig and Paul highlight the importance of the relationship between the storytellers and the

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<sup>24</sup> Tweet thus no page number

audience. I felt a sense of belonging there from my first visit and others expressed this sentiment to me. There is a powerful sense of *communitas*.

Victor Turner first coined the term as an anthropological category in 1969 and it has gained wide purchase within the discipline and beyond (*cf* V. Turner 1974, 1995; Goodman and Goodman 1960; Austin 1981; O'Connor 1997; Ingham and McDonald 2003; E. Turner 2012). *Communitas* occurs when a temporary, often unstructured group of people experience a shared feeling and a strong sense of bonding, or in an established community when members overcome their structural distinctions. It is 'richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones' (V. Turner 1995:139) and 'when *communitas* emerges, one feels it; it is a fact of everyone's experience' (E. Turner 2012:xii). This is often (but not exclusively) during a ritual, a rite of passage or some other transitional event. Although each person experiences *communitas* individually, it is the fact that this is done *collectively*, and that the sum of this shared feeling is more than the individual expressions of it that sets it apart from, say, an individual's revelatory experience. This is not something easily articulated – or analysed in words – because it is *felt* and this sense of shared feeling cannot be imposed, although the conditions for it to occur can be put into place. Victor Turner saw it emerging only when there was no social structure in place, where the rules or hierarchies of society are temporarily suspended, enabling everyone to be equal. Meanwhile, 'the story form [is] the speech of *communitas*' (E. Turner 2012:9) and laughter is a key feature. Stories can be liberating:

[S]tories allow us to tell certain things about our lives which we would never allow ourselves to tell in real life. In fantasy, as it were, the guards are down, the censors gone on holiday, and all kinds of suppressed or silenced material can find its way into language for the first time.

(Kearney 2002:25)

When we combine all of these elements we can begin to see how the notion of *communitas* can be applied to Tenx9. Justin is a regular storyteller there and the story he told on 'Bodies' night demonstrates Kearney's point about un-silencing.

I was a bit of a weedy child if truth be told, not a cool kid at all. Not a cool kid. I used to pretend I was an osprey, from an egg to a chick to a fish-murderin' bird. That's a bit fucking weird, for sure! I liked wildlife programmes you see. Did you know that when water buffalo are attacked they form a circle with their horns pointing outwards and the young in the middle? That's me, in the middle of my family, protected. I liked Greek history too. The Greek army would form a phalanx with their shields protecting not just themselves but the man next to them as well. The one at the end had to be the strongest – he only had his own shield protecting him, not someone else's, and he had to hold the line too as it was pushing towards him. That's my sister, the one at the end of the line. She's always been the strong one, looking out for me. Even now, when I'm 25, she'll tell me when I need to sort myself out. A couple of years ago she fell pregnant and the baby was nearly due. My Dad rang me: 'now Justin, your sister's in hospital but I don't want you to worry.' Ha! I worried straight away. You see, my Dad's a fireman, he's used to counselling people, and he'd put on his counselling voice like when he told me the dog had died. When I got to the hospital Laura looked so pale and so fragile and so small. I'm taller than she is and she's never looked small to me before. She had pre-eclampsia<sup>25</sup>. By the time I got there the baby was born and I knew Laura was out of the woods but she looked so in need of protection. I picked up the baby. How could something so beautiful and perfect have caused this? She was a magical and beautiful baby, a beautiful child now. Well, she can be a wee little shite sometimes but... you know. It made me reassess my relationship with Laura. I have no idea how I would ever live without her. How the family would cope without her. She's always looked out for me and I love her for that. I love you.

Laura was in the audience.

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<sup>25</sup> Pre-eclampsia is a medical condition of pregnancy characterized by high blood pressure. It can develop into eclampsia, a life-threatening condition (NHS n.d.).



When I asked Justin, a month or so later, about telling this story at Tenx9, he said he would not have been able to tell Laura how important she was to him, that he loved her, in any other way. She is two years older and quite different from him in personality. They have different opinions on social matters and politics, different ways of living their lives, but have always been close.

She's super friggin' successful – a Chartered Accountant, a wife and mother, a house, two cars... but always looking out for me, telling me when I needed a shower and a shave, blah, blah. She straightened my hair once and burnt me accidentally. I had this huge blister burning my forehead and she just said, 'ah fuck off, you're being a big girl's blouse!' Brilliant! [Justin grinned, then became serious.] I knew [she] was in the audience [that night] and I was trying to tell her something that I obviously don't communicate to her privately. If I'd've told her on our own, she'd probably would've said, 'ach, fuck off with ye!' [This story] felt like a present to her. I usually tell funny stories, like about having arguments with my ex-girlfriend while standing naked in the living room... but here's something that I want [her] to know.

Justin could share this deeply personal message to Laura in a room full of strangers because the rules of their engagement with each other that night were changed, just as they were at the hospital. Their normal social structure was no longer in place; it was, in Victor Turner's schema, a transitional space. Usually, when they are alone or in the presence of family or friends, their relationship is expressed through banter and Justin is the helpless little brother, Laura the responsible older sister. Maybe this way of being had become a habit, love expressed through taking time out to straighten your brother's hair or making sure he showers regularly. But when circumstances are radically altered, when Laura is dangerously ill, Justin is shaken into reassessing this way of being, realising that she cannot always be the strong one at the end of the line. At Tenx9 their communication with each other was radically altered again. They were in the presence of two hundred other people, most of them strangers, all of them witnesses. They were at a social event to tell and to listen to true stories, (*true stories, I love you Laura, hear me say that*), where there is an explicit rule for respect and the storytellers are not questioned.

The [story] liberates the prisoners of our lived experiences into possible worlds where they may roam and express themselves freely, articulating things that generally dare not say their names and giving to our inexperienced experience the chance to be experienced at last.

(Kearney 2002:25)

I consider the audience's role as witness to be key to the *communitas* that occurs at Tenx9. When one looks at the etymology of the verb 'to witness' it is to be present, to authenticate, to attest to the facts (Oxford English Dictionary 2017d). Michael Taussig (2011) asks what the difference is between seeing [or listening] and witnessing. For Taussig, witnessing has a sense of gravity: 'to *witness*, as opposed to *see*, is to be implicated in the process of judgement' (2011:71, original emphasis). Justin says I love you Laura and two hundred people silently affirm: yes, he does. His story was only for one person, but to be told more meaningfully the audience was essential – he needed the presence of many.

Magdalena Weiglhofer (2014) was closely involved in an initiative in Northern Ireland called Theatre of Witness, where people affected by the Troubles, from both sides of the conflict, performed their stories on stage as monologues: the storyteller offered their story as the truth and by sharing asked that it be accepted as such. The witness empathises (or not) with the storyteller and then sits in judgement: Weiglhofer calls this ethical intersubjectivity. But in terms of such a judgement, how do we know that Justin is telling the truth? I do not doubt his story, nor any of those I heard at Tenx9, but 'telling stories' is also a way of saying 'telling lies': a way of gently admonishing children; 'are you telling me stories?' 'Tall tales' are those that stretch the truth, weaving fact with fiction so you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. Tenx9 is, above all, an evening of entertainment. Justin has told stories several times and, like Nuala, he does not write the story out beforehand but practices it verbally, talking to himself as he walks to work to figure out the story structure. Justin's stories are usually very funny and self-deprecating – dates that went wrong, relationships that failed – and with a lot of swearing. He recounted to me what Pádraig once said to him, mimicking his Cork accent, '[Justin], could you swear less? You said 'fuck' like twenty times in your last story?' But the story about Laura had little swearing. Justin used powerful metaphors (the water buffalo, the

Greek phalanx) to explain his relationship to his sister, and at the end of the story he looked at one person, presumably Laura, to say I love you. These were the markers of veracity that he wanted, needed, the witnesses to testify to. And it was necessary that these witnesses were strangers.

Simmel, writing in 1908, argues that the stranger 'often receives the most surprising openness – confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person' (1950:404). Justin is able to be open to a room full of strangers in a way that he cannot with his sister because his way of being with her is based on the jester or the helpless brother. Schuetz (1944) states that the stranger does not share the basic assumptions of the in-group and thus has to question what the in-group would find unquestionable. For Justin, and possibly for his friends and family, his love for Laura may be unquestionable, a given based on what they know and have observed. And because Justin's and Laura's way of being together is based on banter, verbal expressions of love become unspeakable – 'if I'd have told her I loved her she would've said 'ach, fuck off with ye''. But in telling his story to strangers Justin *has* to articulate the unquestionable to explain his love for his sister.

Justin knows that Laura is in the audience and he uses the presence of the strangers to speak to her directly. The nature of storytelling at Tenx9 is that storytellers have the floor and there is no verbal feedback during the story. Laura cannot come back with a one-liner without breaching that social boundary. Hence, the audience – the witnesses, the *strangers* – are central to Justin's storytelling. Weiglhofer (2014) comments on the importance of *communitas* during Theatre of Witness performances, and that that audience become 'finely attuned' (Dolan 2005:11) to the stories they hear. At Tenx9 storytellers share confidences with a finely attuned audience and it is both the presence of strangers *and* the *communitas* that is experienced that makes this a privileged space.

Victor Turner identified how spontaneous *communitas* cannot be maintained for long and that it must develop a structure of its own. Therefore he distinguished between three types of *communitas*: *existential* or *spontaneous*, when the feelings of specialness and bonding emerge unbidden; *normative* *communitas* in which the existential form is organised into a perduring social system; and *ideological* *communitas*, which spells out 'the optimal social conditions under which such

experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply' (1995:132). We see all three at Tenx9 as I outline below.

Paul and Pádraig work hard to make Tenx9 a safe space for storytellers and audience. In so doing, they set out the optimal conditions for *communitas* to flourish so that it becomes a normative experience. I asked Paul how they went about establishing a trusting atmosphere:

[With storytellers who are] first-timers, we like to see [the story beforehand to check] that they've got it, that they're not coming to give a party-political rant or, you know, pro-life or pro-choice or anything like that. We work hard to create an atmosphere through what we say and how we speak to the audience. We try to be friendly, warm, but we make it clear 'turn off your phones,' you know, 'be respectful'. We very deliberately have those gaps where people can go to the bar, can go to the toilet, can get a smoke, so to minimise in and out activity when people are speaking. We try to be funny, without going too far, you know (...) It has to be a venue where people will feel safe and able to share, and you also have to instil that idea in the audience that you're kind of privileged because you're hearing something about somebody's life that they may never have shared with anybody.

Paul and Pádraig tell stories too, so they are sharing personal information. Thus it becomes a virtuous circle: some people are vulnerable sharing stories, some people are very funny, the audience listens respectfully and applauds heartily, some people speak directly to the storytellers afterwards to share their appreciation, and the chosen venue is the Black Box in the bohemian part of Belfast. All of these elements come together to encourage other people to tell stories – the 'Canterbury effect' as Smith calls it (1998:238), referencing Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval tales – and in turn this encourages people to come for a great night out: what in Belfast parlance is great 'craic' but what I have argued is more than that, it is '*communitas*'.

*Communitas* does have its critics. John Eade notes that pilgrimages, far from having the anti-structure that Turner describes are, in fact, highly structured,

drawing on his own experience as a *brancardier*, or helper, at Lourdes, 'one of the most famous shrines in Christendom' (1991:51). One could argue that there is a defined structure at Tenx9 and there is nothing magical about it – people go out to tell and to listen to good stories and it is an enjoyable night out. However, the concept of anti-structure is only one aspect of Turner's theory. Dutton (2005) argues that *communitas* cannot be understood as a universal concept but I am not making a universal claim here, merely applying it to this ethnographic example. People at Tenx9 told me they experienced a powerful sense of togetherness. I experienced it myself. Therefore, I posit that *communitas* is useful as an analytical tool to explain that phenomenon.

### **Juxtaposition Of Stories**

One interesting aspect of Tenx9 is the mingling of stories: how those that are funny or mundane are juxtaposed against sad or profound ones. As Caroline says, 'You weep with those who weep and you dance with those who are happy'. For example, one evening the theme was 'What I Learnt in School'. A sample of these stories can be seen on the promotional video on the Tenx9 website (Tenx9 n.d. b). There was a funny story of a woman who became the first female table tennis champion at Gilnahirk Primary School, and it was accompanied by lots of cheering; one woman told how she struggled in games at school because she was very large and running around was difficult and painful – this story had some poignant moments, but there was much hilarity when she projected a photograph of the awful Big Blue Knickers that were then part of regulation sports kit for young girls; one man talked about when his Dad was imprisoned for refusing to sign the census as a protest against internment (imprisonment without trial) and how, as a child, he did not understand what that meant. This story was met with respectful silence. And one woman spoke of her childhood eczema and how a schoolgirl told everyone she had leprosy: the timing of her delivery and facial expression indicated this was funny, to which everyone laughed. But the most poignant story that night, and one that had a profound effect on the audience, was the one that Tom told. He began in a quiet voice and talked about being an outsider at school because he enjoyed his lessons,

and he made friends with a motley crew of misfits who would gather in the library. Continuing in a quiet and unassuming voice he told anecdotes about his friends but, as his story unfolded, it was about one friend in particular:

It was Christmas time and in my friend's house they had a large tree with lots of presents under it. He was really excited by these and he persuaded his parents to let him open one of them on Christmas Eve. He chose the largest present – it was a box of magic tricks – and he went off to play with it. A couple of hours later his Dad thought that his son must be having a good time with his new toy, so he went up to the loft, which was the playroom. That's where he found him. He'd set up a small camcorder in the loft to capture himself performing the trick. It went tragically wrong. My friend was hanging from the rafter by his 'magic' rope, a trick from a child's toy box that had fatal consequences. I learnt about this story at school, when we went back after the Christmas break.

When Tom started to talk there was some glass-clinking-crisp-rustling background noise, but as the story unfolded the audience became absolutely silent. You could hear the proverbial pin drop. Through the normative *communitas* that is a feature of Tenx9, a stronger, spontaneous *communitas* emerged. Turner notes that 'spontaneous *communitas* has something "magical" about it' (V. Turner 1995:139) and everyone was spell-bound listening to Tom's story. Tenx9 was a safe enough venue, with a safe and appreciative audience, for him to share this painful story.

All of the people I spoke to after that night commented on this story without any prompt from me. They told me how powerful it was and that it was testimony to Tenx9 that these stories could sit alongside those that are funny. As discussed earlier in the chapter, each story is complete: a short and self-contained narrative that weaves its way, from beginning to end, around a clear narrative thread and extraneous events are excised. Because they are true and personal stories, they reflect aspects of the lives of the storytellers. But there is something about the juxtaposition of stories that also reflects life as lived. Just as funny, sad, profound and mundane stories sit side by side at Tenx9, so too do we experience funny, sad,

profound and mundane events in our lives juxtaposed against each other or even, sometimes, occurring simultaneously. We may be grieving the death of a loved one but the dog still needs feeding; consuming the television news we watch royal visits overseas then a refugee crisis followed by an advert for cars or cat food.

At Tenx9 we can vicariously experience the joys and pains of life together through the narratives that are shared. Each of the individual stories told helps to order the disorderly: to search for meaning in becoming an artist, or living with cancer, or winning the table tennis championship, or the death of a childhood friend. But this jumble of stories is reminiscent of the jumble of life events and I propose that it also illustrates a re-narration of Belfast.

### **Re-Narrating Belfast**

It is not my intention to deny or denigrate the Troubles, nor to ignore the importance of these issues to people living in the Northern Ireland now. Neither do I wish to minimise the deeply held religious faith that many people have. But, as discussed in the Introduction, many other academics are exploring those positions, those viewpoints, that history. My argument throughout this dissertation is that stories of everyday life are pushed to the narratorial margin in Northern Ireland and my intention is to disinter them. I use the term 'Troubled' as shorthand to encompass the grand narratives that Belfast has come to be understood by; in Northern Ireland, in the UK and globally. This includes not only the conflict from 1968 to 1998, but also the ethno-national-religious differences and the conflicts that led up to the Troubles and those that continue today. 'Troubled Belfast' therefore includes a grand sweep of history, and widely different and strongly held views on politics and religion. I am aware that this simplifies what is a very complex and nuanced situation. However, I believe that for people living in Northern Ireland this shorthand would be understood.

At Tenx9, stories about religion or past conflict are neither banned nor explicitly invited, although there is a set of editorial guidelines as Pádraig explains:

If someone is telling a story that has religion, politics, conflict etc. in the background that's great. If someone is telling a story that would only be understandable to someone from their religious/political background we would suggest they open up the narrative so those who don't share the background can enjoy the story. If someone is telling a story that seems to be trying to make an argument for joining a political, religious or other viewpoint, we suggest they don't tell the story at Tenx9, and instead buy their friends a pint and have a good political or religious discussion together!

Editorial control is exercised through these guidelines, published in short on the website, and by Paul and Pádraig insisting on seeing first-timers' stories before they are told. Although Pádraig states above that politics and religion are not banned, in my experience, although religion is sometimes referred to as background context, the past conflict very rarely comes up. This seems to be despite the fact that Pádraig Ó Tuama is well known in Northern Ireland. A theologian and a poet, he is known as someone who has worked tirelessly in conflict resolution for many years and is now the leader of the Corrymeela Community, a Christian community that is Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation (Corrymeela n.d.). However, his reputation does not seem to have skewed the stories to these topics. Indeed, the vast majority of the stories told at Tenx9 are like those highlighted in this chapter: they are the profound and quotidian, funny and serious *non-Troubled* recounting of everyday life. I argue that, at Tenx9, the storytellers are *choosing* not to tell Troubled stories.

This may in part be due to the experience and expectations that people have of Tenx9 stories: when non-Troubled tales are told and enjoyed this becomes the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) of Tenx9. I use this term advisedly, since I mean by this that certain ways of being have become the socialized norm, and people's stories are shaped, to a certain extent, by the style and content of storytelling they have experienced. I am not using this as a structural term that takes away people's agency. Stories shared at Tenx9 become a community of practice, whereby a group of people share particular practices and, through this, individually and collectively,



experience the world in an 'historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (Wenger 1998:47). The community of practice here is one of the ordinary and everyday, not of past and ongoing conflict.

In addition, we do not know in what way the conflict may have touched those in the room. There may be specific reasons, not shared with me, why they do not tell those stories. The opportunity to tell non-Troubled stories is also encouraged by the neutral venue: the Black Box in the Cathedral Quarter, since this bohemian part of Belfast appears to exist outwith the sectarian mapping of the city. But I believe that the choice of stories told is driven, in large part, because people do not want the old fare served up: 'We are continually being changed by as well as changing the experience of others' (Jackson 1989:3).

Several people commented to me that the stories cover 'the whole range of human experience': 'they're about the human condition,' 'a way to explore what it is to be human and of the fabric of human communication.' When you put this together with non-Troubled stories, this sends a powerful message about what it is to be human now in Belfast. It is not just about the past, about the church, about politics, about conflict. And the popularity of Tenx9, albeit among a specific subset of people, suggests that this re-narration of Belfast as a mundane, funny, banal, interesting and small 't' troubles city, is widely shared.

Because these are 'human stories', those told on any one night are likely to resonate with the experiences of those who listen. These true and personal stories can validate other people's own experiences, or give people courage, or appeal to their curiosity and imagination about what other people's lives are like: as Caroline describes it, it is 'like telling you a secret, opening a wee door that not everyone can get in'. The wee secret, what these stories are telling us, is that ordinary life in Belfast is interesting too and through listening to these stories we can come to know something of what life is like there.

## **Conclusion**

My intention in this chapter, first and foremost, has been to showcase quotidian stories told at Tenx9 and to do so, as far as possible, in people's individual voices,

resulting in several long extracts from fieldnotes or recorded interviews. I considered why we tell stories, which is, in part, to discover who we are, to help clarify what is meaningful to us, and to narrate ourselves to other people, and I identified the narrative structure that our stories have. But I also posed a question: what inspires people to tell stories, particularly those that expose their vulnerabilities? In response, I explored the concept of *communitas*, the special feeling of bonding and togetherness that groups of people can experience when something positive and powerful is happening communally.

Victor Turner (1995) links *communitas* with rites of passage and there is something of a rite of passage about telling a story at Tenx9; about putting a life experience into words, crafting it into a story and then making a public declaration, particularly if someone has never shared it before. An experienced storyteller congratulated Nuala after the first time she spoke and Nuala said to her, 'You're like a hero to me! I'm so thrilled you liked my story!'

But there is also a rite of passage about hearing stories at Tenx9. Many people I spoke to recounted the first time they went there and how powerful it was for them. For instance, Caroline told me about a raw and painful story told by a transgendered woman that she and a friend listened to: she said to her friend, 'did you not feel the atmosphere in the room? Everybody, *everybody*, ***everybody*** was wishing that woman well.' As Paul and Pádraig, the facilitators, say, it is a privilege to hear stories and the audience is a vital part of the Tenx9 experience. I also considered how the juxtaposition of different stories, funny and sad, profound and mundane, reflects the disconnected juxtaposition of our life experiences.

But in what way is Tenx9 an urban phenomenon? I have argued that it is the figure of the stranger that is key to witnessing stories told at Tenx9 and strangers are a phenomenon of city life. But, more specifically, what is it that makes Belfast Tenx9 a *Belfast* phenomenon? This links to the main thesis of this dissertation: that there are many ordinary and everyday stories to be heard in Belfast that are Not-the-Troubles. People could tell stories of past conflict but they chose not to. The framing of Tenx9 is of a city where the grand narratives are dominated by the Troubles but it is the quotidian that is narrated at Tenx9. And these stories are important. As Justin says:

I [tell stories] about break-ups with ex-girlfriends that seem meaningless compared to something serious like, you know, the death of a family member. [It seems] unimportant but then it's [about] perspective as well. It might be unimportant to some but [not to me].

As I finished drafting this chapter, a new blog popped up on the Tenx9 website. It was a link to a review posted by one Cara Gibney who had just attended her first Tenx9 event. It summed up the spirit of Tenx9 and placed it in a particularly Belfast context. With her permission, it is re-told here, eloquently concluding the chapter:

[On] Wednesday night I saw humble, raw, unadorned, talent stand in the Black Box and tell stories that made me tearful. All sorts of tearful. Sad tearful, laughing tearful, the sting behind the eyes when someone puts into words that which you have left at feeling and not even put into thought.

Just people. You and I type people, no best sellers or renowned critics. Just people who had wrestled and twisted and rifled through corners for those words. They had risked the precious and decanted onto paper those particular thoughts and faces from the past. Then they stood in front of a room so full that I couldn't find an area of wall to lean against, and they told us their stories.

(...)

In all seriousness I have been ashamed of coming from here [Belfast] for the past while. Despairing and angry with our 'leaders.' Humiliated and filled with dread for our future. Last night filled me up again.

(Gibney 2017)

## Chapter Four

### PUTTING 'PLACE' IN ITS PLACE

#### Storytelling On Location

Story and place are integrally bound and you have to learn about both to find your way around.

(Donnan 2005:85)

The socio-cultural is the stolen essence of the personal, which the latter should reassume.

(Rapport 2008:331)



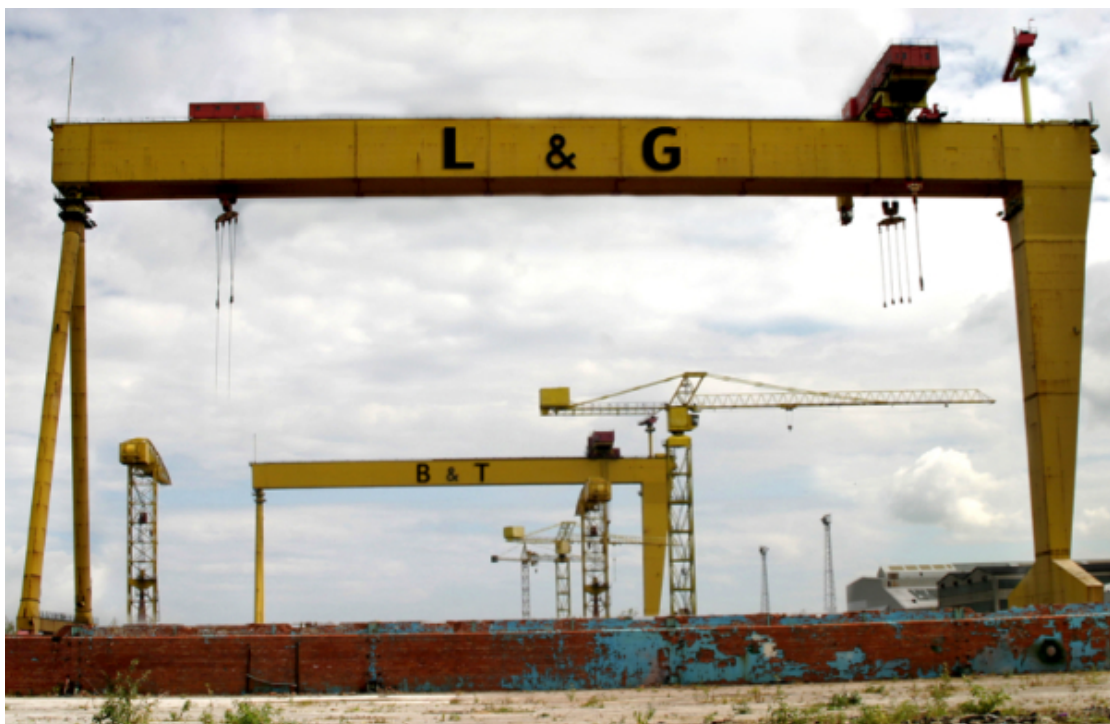
Figure 12 Samson and Goliath: gantry cranes, Harland and Wolff shipyard <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> © [Wilson Adams](#) and licensed for reuse under this [Creative Commons Licence](#).

The huge yellow cranes in the dockyard are an imposing sight in Belfast. If you arrive by boat or fly into the city airport they herald your arrival, looming into view in front of you or below you. The closer you get to your destination the larger they appear and it seems, almost, as though they are pulling you in. Each one is stamped with the initials H & W for Harland and Wolff, the founders of the shipyard. At three hundred and forty-eight feet high, 'Samson' is the larger of the two, although upstream 'Goliath' is an impressive three hundred and fifteen feet, and you can remember which is which with the mnemonic 'Samson by the sea'.

For some of Belfast's citizens *the symbolism of many places and structures reaches far beyond their function*, as this chapter will explore, and these gantry cranes are no exception. In August 2006 I saw an art exhibition in the John Hewitt pub on Donegall Street, Belfast, and a photograph of the cranes attracted my attention. The '*Underexposed*' exhibition was part of the Belfast Gay Pride Festival and in the photograph the cranes' iconic initials had been replaced by L & G on one crane and B & T on the other – Lesbian and Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.



**Figure 13 'David and Delilah'** <sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> © Gareth Lee and Ken Moffett.

The photograph interested me because the cranes are so visible, dominating the Belfast skyline and, as I will show, they are a reminder of the city's industrial past and of the social and religious inequities that the shipyard, for some, represented. Also, in 2006, LGBT people in the city were still fairly 'invisible', as reflected in the exhibition's title, so the desire to proclaim an LGBT identity from the top of the most iconic landmark in Belfast was a confident – and, I thought, symbolic – statement. Indeed, the title of the photograph, 'David and Delilah', inverts the cranes' names and proclaims the invert, an old word for homosexual (Ellis 1915), to be part of the Belfast urban landscape. I left the city a few days later, but the image stayed with me and I regretted not finding out more about the photograph and the photographer. That was to change during my fieldwork eight years later, but before returning to this photograph I will outline the key argument of the chapter, explain 'the place of place' of the chapter's title and discuss the method I use to elicit people's stories relating to place.

### **Surfaces, Symbols And Strangers**

A key thesis of this dissertation is that fleeting and superficial encounters with strangers are a central feature of city life: paying attention to how people present themselves to strangers opens an interesting line of anthropological inquiry, since the surface manifestations that people present to others are not trivial. This chapter furthers the notion of surfaces by considering how people relate to places in the city: the surfaces of the city, as it were. I do this through a method (described in due course) as storytelling-on-location, or storywalks to storyplaces. My use of compound nouns here is intentional, since I argue that the stories people tell and the places those stories relate to are intertwined. To understand better the symbolic importance that people attribute to places, whereby a physical object represents an abstract concept and these symbols have 'a complex series of associations, often of an emotional kind' (Firth 1973:75), storytelling *in place*, not just of place, enhances this understanding.

As noted in Chapter Two there are degrees of strangeness (Diken 1998): what Kearney and Semonovitch refer to as 'strangers on a scale from the most

elusive and unfamiliar to the most everyday and familiar' (2011:23). To explore encounters with surfaces, I now introduce three people with whom I have different degrees of acquaintanceship. I met Gareth at the 'Out and About' walking group and I had attended three walks and one social function before the storywalk described in this chapter. Sam I had met only once before, when I approached him after he gave a public talk on the future of the built environment in Belfast. Meanwhile Geraldine was the facilitator of the book group I attended; she agreed to work with me after the first time we met, but by the time we did the storywalk I had attended several more book groups, gone with her to a couple of Tenx9 storytelling evenings and had been to lunch at her house.

To interrogate the relationship between story and place I anchor the argument to the two quotations that opened this chapter. The first, by Hastings Donnan, is that story and place are integrally bound and the second, by Nigel Rapport, is that the socio-cultural is the stolen essence of the personal. Whilst these quotes are not mutually exclusive, they do indicate distinctly different perspectives on the place of place in people's lives. Donnan draws on his research with Protestants living in South Armagh, an area near the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland where the population is overwhelmingly Catholic. Protestants here articulated a close relationship between story and place, not only in the memories that different places invoked, but also as a way to distinguish insiders and outsiders, place as way-markers one would not find on a map. For example, the directions given to Donnan to find George's house, one of his research participants were, '[turn left] at Sheridan's and Rowley's Rocks, down as far as Acheson's. George's house is just opposite the Nesbitt's, but you have to cross through Turner's yard' (2005:80). Donnan finds these directions incomprehensible and inevitably gets lost on the way. Story and place are also bound together here as expressions of identity, stories that demonstrate this part of South Armagh as a *Protestant* place. By asserting that the relationship between story and place is integrally bound, Donnan implies that one cannot understand the former without the latter and vice versa.

Rapport, on the other hand, believes that the concept of place has been reified to such an extent that, as a marker of the socio-cultural, it is a thief of individuality, because people exist above and beyond place. His term 'stolen

essence' derives from his rejection of the Durkheimian (1975) notion that social and cultural factors *determine* one's identity (see also Lévi-Strauss 1962), since this implies that a person has no (or diminished) agency and free will, and he describes this as 'a theft of an intrinsic privacy and personality of consciousness' (Rapport 2008:332). For example, a boy may have been born in the late 1960s on the Falls or the Shankill roads, heartlands of republicanism and loyalism respectively, and one of the worst areas for Troubles-related violence (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006), and he may have chosen to join a paramilitary organization, but he does not *automatically* adopt those political positions or behaviours by virtue of being born and brought up there. For Rapport, individuals and their identities transcend place and to argue otherwise is to accord place a primacy and determinacy that it does not deserve. Jackson summarises Rapport's position as 'it is individuals – not society or history or circumstance – who make and unmake the world' (Jackson 2003:xii). Rapport states that human beings are individuals before being anything else: '*Before and beside and beyond* being members of this community, this ethnicity, this church, this nation, this locale' (2013:199, original emphasis). He does not suggest that the place one comes from or goes to or resides in is irrelevant, *but it is not an objective determinate of an individual's thinking and behaviour as, like all else, place calls for personal interpretation for it to become meaningful.*

I use these two perspectives on place as my reference points in discussing Gareth at the dockyard, Sam in the city centre, and Geraldine at Belfast City Hospital. I consider to what extent their stories and places are intertwined by exploring the symbolic meaning they imbue those places with, what the surfaces of the city mean to them. I argue that, although there are times when place is significant in shaping people's stories and thus in shaping themselves, the agency for imbuing place with meaning always resides with the individual, and that it is the hegemonic narrative of Belfast as a Troubled and divided city that is responsible for any 'stolen essence'.

### **Defining 'Story' And 'Place'**

Before proceeding further, I will clarify how I use the terms 'story' and 'place'. I discussed my position with regard to storytelling in Chapter Three, therefore I will



only summarise it here. By 'story' I mean the narratives that people tell about aspects of their lives. I use the word 'story' intentionally, in part because it is a more vernacular term than 'narrative' when explaining to people what I want from them, but also because storytelling is 'a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (Jackson 2006;15). Stewart argues that narrative is 'first and foremost a mediating form through which "meaning" must pass. Stories, in other words, are productive' (1996:29). Therefore, asking people to tell me stories about place will help, I believe, to expose those meanings and may throw some light on whether people feel disempowered, or not, by place, whether any essence has been stolen. Finally, stories offer us an imagined way of being in the world (Kearney 2002); Gareth, Sam and Geraldine all share something of their imagined Belfast.

De Certeau argues that stories transform spaces into places, where 'space' has a quality of innumerable possibilities and 'place' has a distinct location and stability (1998:118). Casey (1996) meanwhile rejects the notion that space is some kind of neutral *tabula rasa* that preexists place. My use of the term 'place' is more akin to Casey as it encompasses notions of both stability and possibility. For me, place is not only a physical space and the structures within it, but also the inhabitants of that place, the socio-cultural activities associated with it, and the extent to which both the built and natural environments are shaped to convey meaning. Meanwhile, place exists through time, it is not a static phenomenon but an indefinite and changing one (Casey 1996).

This dynamic quality means that writing about specific places artificially preserves them in moments of time. How place is shaped in Belfast is much written about but this is frequently in relation to *very particular* moments in time and *very particular* events in history: to the Troubles, to the religious divide, and to attempts to reshape place for post-conflict reconciliation. For example, place is discussed through murals, flags or parades (Jarman 1997; Jarman 1998; Rolston 2004), the securitization of the city centre, or the so-called 'peace walls' that divide Catholic and Protestant areas (Cunningham 2014; Gormley-Heenan et al. 2013). Place is described in ongoing sectarian disputes (DeYoung 2016) or is shaped by planning policy analysed through a class and ethno-religious lens (Neill 1995). Even when

place is explored as post-conflict regeneration the Troubles or sectarianism are still the defining features that a reimagining of the city is responding to (*cf.* Neill 2006; Mitchell and Kelly 2011; Hocking 2015) and shared or neutral places are often defined as they relate to Catholics or Protestants (Rallings 2014; Hickey 2014).

If story and place are integrally bound, as Donnan asserts, then the story these authors tell of Belfast is of a city of the Troubles, of the causes of the Troubles and of the aftermath. This plethora of academic writing on Troubled places is disproportionate. Some, probably many, people have a relationship to place that is not 'Troubled'. Therefore, I will consider how people 'encounter places, perceive them, and invest them with significance' (Feld and Basso 1996:8) that moves away from the Troubles.

### **'Tell Me Your Stories; Tell Me In Place'**

There is a strong relationship between anthropological knowledge and the site of its production; this is the *raison d'être* for an anthropologist to go to the field, since it is 'being there' (Geertz 1988:1) that enables one to understand the worldviews of others. Thus methods are integral to ways of knowing. Here I employ storytelling-on-location. Building on a fieldwork method developed by Andrew Irving (2007), I ask people to tell me their personal stories *in the place that the story relates to*, sometimes walking from place to place in the process. Evans and Jones suggest that walked interviews 'give access to richer understandings of place' (2011:849), the slow pace enabling a sensory reading of the urban (Shortell 2016), offering insights into both place and self (Solnit 2002). It could be argued that by staging this event I am preempting the argument that story and place are bound together. Let me explain the rationale for the method before returning to this critique.

Most people whom I approach are given *carte blanche* to choose their storyplaces – I ask them to choose somewhere meaningful to them and I do not know what stories they will tell until we get there (this was the case with Sam). However, I sometimes ask people to visit a particular place, as we will see with Gareth and the dockyard cranes, to elaborate on a story that I only know in part.

Sometimes, people tell me some of the story beforehand while they are choosing where to go, as we will see with Geraldine.

‘Please tell me your stories’, I say to people; I do not ‘interview’ the storyteller but let the conversation flow naturally, responding with comments or questions as they come to mind. Nevertheless, they are explicitly ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess 2000:102): the storyteller knows they are helping with my research, and their stories and our conversations are captured by digital technology: a small voice recorder that sits in a pocket linked up to a lapel microphone and either a small camera or, more usually, a smartphone, so they can record their storyplace visually. Given the ubiquity of smartphones and the unobtrusiveness of the voice recorder, the recording equipment aids data collection without getting in the way of the story (as I discussed in Chapter Three, people often forget they have the microphone on) and the transcriptions enable me to report someone’s words accurately. These records are supplemented by fieldnotes. However, the method is not foolproof; reliance on technology means being reliable in using it properly. On the storywalk with Geraldine I inadvertently did not record our conversation, discussed in that section of the chapter.

‘Tell me your stories in place’, I say. This gestures towards a complex temporality and sensuousness: storyteller and story-hearer are both present at this site-specific performance and, for the storyteller at least, this is a revisit, a recounting of a memory; it is more obviously a multisensorial experience for both listener and hearer, since the sounds, smells etc. of the place are evoked (such as cars or people passing by, diesel fumes or scented flowers), even if this occurs subconsciously. The focus on stories about place also means that during the storytelling we are not necessarily looking at each other, but looking instead at objects, buildings, street corners. Clare Balding has for many years walked with other people, recording their stories for BBC Radio 4’s *Ramblings* programme. She describes the phenomenon thus:

There is only occasional eye contact, so none of that awkward looking up and away if you think you’ve caught their eye for too long. You are sharing an experience, looking at a view together, puffing up a hill or

watching the waves crash into the rocks below. You face the weather together, and as two or three hours unfold the layers peel back.

(Balding 2014:7)

Although Balding is referring here to long walks in the countryside, this deflection of eye contact and the focus on an object is relevant to storywalks too, making them potentially less intimidating than an interview.

There are several reasons for employing this method. It builds on storytelling as a local cultural-symbolic form – there is a long history of storytelling in Northern Ireland as discussed in the Introduction and evidenced in Chapter Three at Tenx9. The multisensorial nature of storytelling-on-location acts as a prompt for memory and imagination, by tapping into sensory as well as cognitive memories, and many more stories are forthcoming as a result.<sup>28</sup> It is a method that participants tend to enjoy (Lane 2008, unpublished), especially if we visit a place with particular resonance for the storyteller or they have not been back there for a long time. Using extracts from transcripts and the storytellers' photographs puts their point of view front stage and, when I analyse the storywalks, I can remember the scene more vividly, listening to the multifarious sounds accompanying the story. Finally, revisiting a storyplace is not just about mnemonics: the story becomes much more alive in the telling (Donnan 2005), as storytelling-on-location enables both teller and hearer to engage their imaginations more easily – this will be seen particularly with Geraldine's story.

For Casey, place is not just where things *are* but where they *happen*, thus 'lend[ing] themselves so well to narration' (2000:21). By asking someone to visit a storyplace, whether of their choosing or mine, the storyteller may have thought beforehand what story to tell and how to tell it, maybe mentally scripting the memories and imagining the story reception to the immediate audience (including themselves) and the wider, unseen audience beyond, since they are aware that the stories they tell me may end up in print. This method, then, intentionally acknowledges storytelling as a performance, what Irving calls a 'staged encounter'

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<sup>28</sup> Although I have not (yet) incorporated taste or touch into storywalks, they are open to this expansion, for example including food or haptic sensations.

(2007:186), as performance of the self is constructed by the storyteller beforehand, consciously or subconsciously, and the place is imagined and constructed beforehand too, being predetermined by the mind. Meanwhile, stories that are remembered and retold on the day are likely to be more spontaneous and sometimes the powerful experience of being-in-place can bring up unbidden, painful memories. Storytellers know they can stop a recording or ask for a particular story not to be used, and all have given explicit permission for me to use their stories. The storyteller may have many reasons for choosing a particular place, maybe to educate or to entertain or to dwell in a memory, but whatever the reason, and whether that is shared with me or not, the storytellers were choosing to portray themselves to someone they did not know particularly well, and choosing to portray themselves in a particular light.

But to what extent will the method predispose the findings and frame my analysis? Asking people to tell stories in the places they relate to implicitly reveals my belief that the links between them are important (otherwise why employ this method?) and the outcome inevitably links story and place. There is a self-reinforcing relationship between data, praxis and theory that Turner refers to as a 'hermeneutic Catherine wheel' (1982:98). But I would argue this is a truism of ethnographic fieldwork. As anthropologists we might wish to be some kind of neutral sponge soaking up all we can of the world perspective of others, but we take ourselves, in all our complexity, into the field, including the knowledge we have already gained and theoretical positions we may hold. For example, my research is to 'test' to what extent people dwell within or transcend Troubled narratives of Belfast. Thus I set up a Troubled/non-Troubled dichotomy. Irving suggests that one way to avoid presupposing or imposing knowledge of the other is to 'address people as subjects of their own life experience' (2015:70), while acknowledging that this is a practical and methodological problem, since we have no independent access to people's minds.

Although this method links story and place I argue that the multisensorial nature of it provokes unplanned thoughts or imaginings, and which of these the person chooses to relate as stories or anecdotes gives an insight into what they find meaningful. Belfast is a city that wears its Troubled history on its walls and in its social gatherings. By giving people *carte blanche* to choose which places to visit and

which stories to tell gives an opportunity to discern to what extent they see themselves as shaped by place and whether this is a Troubled narrative or not.

This chapter, then, has three intentions: to explore the link between story, place and individuality; to examine my chosen method for doing this; and to consider the content and context of the stories that are brought forth.

### **Returning To The Gantry Cranes And The Photograph ‘David And Delilah’**

Late September 2014 and my PhD fieldwork in Belfast is almost over. I’ve dropped in to say goodbye to the folk at Queerspace, a voluntary organisation based at the LGBT Centre in Waring Street. I’ll be sad to go; my dog Torridon and I know several people from the Out and About walking group and we enjoy their company. But while chatting to James about his future plans and mine, I’m suddenly distracted as I espy the photograph I saw in the *Underexposed* exhibition in 2006, propped up on the sofa behind him. I ask James who the photographer is.

‘I don’t know,’ James replies. ‘Ask Gareth’.

Overhearing my question Gareth walks towards us, picks up the image and smiles at it fondly.

‘I took that photo. D’you like it?’

I tell him the story of when I first saw it, eight years ago now. He’s delighted and readily agrees to visit the docks with me. So that’s where we are now, as he tells his story:

Queerspace had Arts Council funding for a project on queer invisibility.<sup>29</sup> We worked with Belfast Exposed, the photographers’ gallery on Donegall Street. They taught us the skills we needed, helped us develop our ideas. I came up with the idea for the cranes – I wanted to reclaim them as a gay symbol. They’re so iconic and such a visible part of Belfast. There would’ve been, still will be, many gay men and women working at the shipyard. I worked with Ken and we took loads of photos of the cranes. The people at

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<sup>29</sup> Queer is frequently used as an inclusive catch-all term for sexual and gender differences from the mainstream and as a political and positive reclamation of the word ‘queer’, often used as a derogatory term (Chase and Ressler 2009).

Belfast Exposed helped us choose this particular image and I photoshopped the initials. Some photos were shown at the John Hewitt, but the exhibition had a bigger launch at Belfast Central Library. Baroness Blood and a few other dignitaries were there. The library said it was the best exhibition launch they'd ever had! There was some negative press of course, but overall it was a really positive reaction and brought LGBT visibility right into the mainstream.



**Figure 14 Gareth next to the Harland and Wolff shipyard**

According to Casey, place is everywhere; we are immersed in it. Place has the power 'to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as *where we are not*)' (Casey 2000:xv, original emphasis) and, I would add, as well as *who* we are not. Gareth explicitly acknowledges the cranes' symbolic importance to him through their visibility and 'iconic' status.<sup>30</sup> But to consider if, and to what extent, Gareth's relationship to these structures is as deterministic as Casey suggests, one needs to understand the history

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<sup>30</sup> Symbolism is explored more fully in Sam's story.

of the dockyard, the recent rejuvenation of the Titanic Quarter, and the history of LGBT rights in Northern Ireland.

Harland and Wolff was once 'the biggest single shipyard in the world' (Foster 2014b:15), building all the ships for the White Star Line, including, most famously in 1911, the ill-fated RMS *Titanic*. At its height at the end of the Second World War (1939-1945) the company employed 26,393 people (Moss and Hume 1986:347). There were big profits for the shareholders and handsome taxes for the Exchequer (Moss and Hume 1986). Industries closely affiliated with ship-building, such as Sirocco Engineering Works and Belfast Ropeworks, also employed men, paid taxes and made profits. But these benefits were not shared equally. The shipyard was a symbol of power for Protestantism and for unionism (Ó Murchú 2005; Byrne 1980). Some Catholics and women were employed there but they were few in comparison and had low-paid, low-status jobs. Although Foster (2014b) speculates that more Catholics were employed at the shipyard than is commonly assumed, based on his assessment of the 1911 census, that is not part of the shipyard's narrative: Harland and Wolff was a man's world with most of the men hailing from Ballymacarret in east Belfast (Hammond 1986), where sons followed in their fathers' and grandfathers' footsteps and for the majority the work was hard, dirty and dangerous.

Belfast experienced rapid de-industrialisation from the mid 1960s onwards (Geary and Johnson 1989; Byrne 1980); the economic decline exacerbated by the Troubles (Gregory et al. 2013). Although the shipyard was not included in the nationalization of the industry, the government held the largest percentage of shares in the company (Moss and Hume 1986), which was now a drain on the Exchequer as money poured in to keep the Belfast shipyard afloat (Geary and Johnson 1989) until the company was purchased by Fred Olsen in 1989 (Fred Olsen Energy n.d.).

Between 1971 and 1991 employment in heavy industry in Northern Ireland fell from a third to a quarter of total employment (Ruane and Todd 1996), but this disproportionately affected east Belfast, and neighbourhoods such as Ballymacarrett are still one of the most deprived areas of the city. The yellow gantry cranes viewed from here form a backdrop to significant 'social, economic and environmental deprivation' (Coyles 2013:334; cf Northern Ireland Housing Executive 2013; Eastside Urban Village Initiative 2016).





**Figure 15 Cranes seen from a derelict site in East Belfast <sup>31</sup>**

Ships are no longer built at Harland and Wolff but this is still a working dockyard, albeit on a smaller scale, servicing oilrigs and ferries and making off-shore wind turbines (Harland and Wolff 2016b). The company accounts for 2015 indicate they have only 208 employees. A new contract for offshore renewables was announced in 2016, with the promise of 200 more jobs (Harland and Wolff 2016a), but this is still just a fraction of its heyday workforce. However, the redundant areas of the shipyard have seen a dramatic rejuvenation.

With £5 billion of investment from public and private finance (Coyles 2013), the renamed Titanic Quarter is ‘the single largest regeneration in Northern Ireland’s

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<sup>31</sup> © EastSide Urban Villages Initiative.

history' (Belfast City Council n.d.). From this viewpoint the gantry cranes form a spectacular backdrop to the silvery Titanic Belfast museum,<sup>32</sup> centrepiece of a development of commercial facilities, offices, private housing and public buildings. An exclusive hotel in the former Harland and Wolff drawing office is under construction and proposed developments include more hotels, leisure facilities and a children's day care centre (FutureBelfast n.d. b). Titanic Quarter hosted the start of Giro d'Italia road race in 2014, Tall Ships Race in 2015, and Proms in the Park in 2016 (Titanic Quarter Belfast n.d. b), all promoting the 'New Northern Ireland' (Ramsey 2013:165) that has left behind its dark history to reap the economic benefits, including an increase in tourism (Belfast Telegraph 2016a), and to indulge in the 'cappuccino culture' (Nolan 2012:10) that comes with gentrification. Titanic Belfast has over one million visitors every year (Titanic Quarter Belfast n.d. a), and the shipyard's former paint shop is now the Titanic Studios, home of *Game of Thrones* and the burgeoning Northern Ireland Screen industry (Northern Ireland Screen n.d.).



**Figure 16 Titanic Belfast museum with Goliath in the background**<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The registered name is Titanic Belfast® but it is commonly referred to as the Titanic museum, even though the design agency for the building state that it is 'not a museum but a visitor experience' (Alexander 2014:89).

<sup>33</sup> © Mehlunge and licensed for reuse under this [Creative Commons Licence](#).

So the gantry cranes can be viewed as a reminder of a more prosperous (Protestant and working-class) past or as a symbol of a more prosperous (gentrified and middle-class) future. But what is Gareth's view of the cranes? He told me that he does not explicitly associate them with Protestantism and unionism, rather he sees them as a link to the past and an industrial heritage to be proud of, although he recognises that there are associations with unionism and discrimination against Catholics. However, by *reclaiming* them as a gay symbol, which was his declared intention with the LGBT photograph, he has to reclaim them from something else. Thus, he implicitly acknowledges that there is an accepted narrative of the shipyard in folk history, since he chooses to disrupt that narrative to impose his own, this being the disruption that I found so arresting in 2006. Gareth explains this place, the dockyard cranes, as meaningful to him not just as a landmark of his hometown but also as a signifier of LGBT invisibility.

Belfast is described as 'homophobic' compared to elsewhere in the United Kingdom (Kitchen and Lysaght 2003:507), a sentiment also stated by Grainne, whom I met for coffee in 2014: 'It's difficult being a lesbian in Northern Ireland – the homophobia, especially among the Protestant community'. There is a close link in the province between church and state. For example, Reverend Ian Paisley established both the Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland and the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party (commonly referred to as the DUP), currently the largest political party in Stormont, the seat of Northern Ireland's devolved government. Over the years, the DUP has 'promoted a particularly virulent form of homophobia' (Rose 1994:13), such as Paisley's 1970s campaign to Save Ulster from Sodomy. Sex between consenting men in Northern Ireland was only decriminalized in 1981, fifteen years after England and Wales, when the European Commission on Human Rights found in favour of Jeff Dudgeon, a gay rights activist from Belfast (*Dudgeon v. United Kingdom* 1981).

The DUP's stance against homosexuality continues. In 2008 Iris Robinson, a DUP former Member of the British Parliament (and wife of Peter Robinson, the DUP former First Minister of Northern Ireland), said in a live radio interview that homosexuality was an abomination that could be cured (Duggan 2010). The ban on gay couples adopting children was only lifted in 2013 after a ruling by the UK

Supreme Court, even though the DUP's then Health Minister, Edwin Poots, tried to challenge this decision (BBC 2013). Poots also fiercely opposed gay men giving blood. This ban was lifted in September 2016 once the position of Health Minister went to Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Féin (McDonald 2016a). At present, Northern Ireland is the only country in the United Kingdom where same-sex marriage is illegal because the DUP has consistently vetoed legislation. A Petition of Concern is a statutory instrument, introduced in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, with the intention to protect minority rights by requiring a cross-community majority (i.e. within each political party) on sensitive issues, but which the DUP is arguably misusing to maintain the status quo. In 2015 they invoked it for the fifth time to prevent a bill on same-sex marriage being discussed, even though a majority of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) were in favour of same-sex marriage (BBC 2015).<sup>34</sup> DUP First Minister Arlene Foster declared the party would continue to use this mechanism for the next five years to protect what the party sees as a traditional definition of marriage (ITV 2016). This contrasts with the Republic of Ireland where, despite opposition from the Catholic Church, the Constitution was amended to allow same-sex marriage following a resounding victory in the 2015 referendum (Ó Caollaí and Hilliard 2015).

The link between the DUP and Presbyterianism is so close that Smyth (1986) refers to the party as a politico-religious organization (see also Southern 2005; Mitchell 2006). This is why Grainne finds it difficult to be a lesbian in the Protestant community, a sentiment I heard others express. However, 'Presbyterianism' is not a homogenous faith. It has a history of schism. For example, there are Free, Evangelical and non-subscribing subdivisions, and not all are against LGBT rights and same-sex marriage. Gareth attends services at All Souls, a gay- and trans-friendly non-subscribing Presbyterian church in Elmwood Avenue in South Belfast. As a gay man and an activist for LGBT rights, visibility and inclusion in Belfast are important for Gareth. He has worked as a volunteer at Queerspace for many years and he recently came to much wider attention when the national and international media

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<sup>34</sup> On 2 November 2015, Stormont voted for the fifth time on same sex marriage. For the first time there was a majority of MLAs in favour (53 for, 52 against).

covered his successful court case against Ashers Bakery, who refused to bake a cake decorated with the message 'support gay marriage'.<sup>35</sup>

So, to explore the relationship between place and story for Gareth, and for other LGBT people in Belfast, we can ask to what extent their individuality is evidenced in the socio-cultural construction of place. Is place a determinant of people's identity, as Casey (1996) suggests, or do people transcend place as Rapport (2013) asserts? Just as place can be shaped by some people to tell a story of conflict or post-conflict, for example through paramilitary murals, or be read as a symbol of unionist domination, as in one telling of the importance of the gantry cranes, it can also be shaped to tell a different story, such as queer (in)visibility, the aim of the *Underexposed* exhibition and Gareth's photograph.

This 'queer' shaping of place was particularly noticeable when I compare my visits to Belfast in 2006 and 2014. Previously, LGBT visibility was restricted to very few places or certain times of the year, for example in gay clubs and organisations, or at the Belfast Gay Pride March. In 2006, the small march went from Writer's Square, opposite St Anne's Cathedral, and down nearby Royal Avenue. But by 2014 the march was bigger, longer and more flamboyant (although still very conservative by 'Pride in London' standards), the two-week Gay Pride festival was officially launched in City Hall by Belfast City Council (where Sinn Féin, not the DUP, is the largest party), and City Hall itself was lit up in rainbow colours on the night of the Pride march, itself a very symbolic act.

By 2014, rainbow flags were more evident in the city too. Belfast Pride parade is held on the first weekend in August, just three weeks after the Twelfth of July celebrations of the Protestant victory (in 1690) of William of Orange. Lavery's pub in

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<sup>35</sup> Ashers Bakery is owned and managed by an evangelical Christian family who do not support same-sex marriage, although this is not stated anywhere in the shop or their publicity. In 2014 Gareth ordered a cake on behalf of Queerspace for an event to celebrate International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. The bakery called two days later to refuse the order and refund the money. Gareth, supported by the Equality Commission, challenged this in court and Ashers, supported by the Christian Institute, were found guilty of direct discrimination, a decision that was upheld by the Court of Appeal in October 2016. This came to the attention of the international press and was reported as a battle between the rights of LGBT people versus the rights of Christians (Richardson 2016; McDonald 2016b).

Bradbury Place had several enormous rainbow flags on the roof. As this is opposite the Loyalist area of Sandy Row, it afforded the sight of Union Jacks and rainbow flags fluttering in close proximity. Colours and flags have great symbolic importance in Northern Ireland, tied so closely to national identity and thus to the Troubles (Bryan and Gillespie 2005; Bryan 2015). The multicoloured rainbow flag, widely linked to LGBT identity (Heinz et al. 2002; Haldeman and Buhrke 2003) could be interpreted as inclusively representing the green and the orange. However, the Lavery's/Sandy Row 'flag-off' appeared to have more than a touch of defiance about it.

But queer visibility is now not *only* associated with Pride. There has been a temporal as well as a geographical expansion. For example, in April 2014 a telephone box in Royal Avenue, the main thoroughfare in the city centre, had a large poster advertising the *Kremlin* night club in Donegall Street as 'Europe's hottest gay venue', thus moving visibility beyond the traditional August weekend as well as out of the 'gay village' and into the mainstream shopping area. On Culture Night in September, when the arts in Belfast are celebrated and the streets are thronged with people, four drag queens were posing on the steps of St Anne's Cathedral, much to the delight of passers-by who were snapping photos with their smartphones. And the Amavi café on Donegall Street has a rainbow flag outside most of the year, not just for Pride. In 2016, LGBT people appropriated symbolic forms of identity-signalling traditionally associated with the ethno-religious conflict – murals and painted kerbstones – to express *their* rights and presence, with a mural of two women kissing painted on a gable wall in Hill Street (McKeown 2016) and rainbow coloured kerbstones outside a gay club in Union Street (Hughes 2016a), both in the Cathedral Quarter. These examples – the *Kremlin* advertisement, the drag queens, the café flag, the murals and the kerbstones – are about varying degrees of temporal and geographical change, and they are all intended to shape place so that it tells a *different* story about Belfast from that most frequently written about.

Although these are different portrayals of the city, story and place are still intertwined. For example, if Gareth had superimposed LGBT onto an image of cranes in Soho, London or Greenwich Village, New York City, both places associated with higher levels of tolerance for LGBT people, the image would lose the meaning that Gareth intended. His LGBT activism in Belfast is specific to this place and is different



from what his activism could be in, say, London where being gay is almost mainstream, or Kampala, Uganda, where being gay risks the death penalty (Cheney 2012). His expression of individuality through his 2006 image of the cranes is fundamentally linked to a particular place and time – this shipyard, this city, this country and this political and social climate, this time – and he chooses to impose his own meaning on these iconic features of the Belfast landscape. This demonstrates Rapport's argument that, although place is not irrelevant, only here does his image mean something special and it is Gareth's agency that determines how he will respond to this place and the meaning he ascribes to it. These emplaced queer stories transcend Troubled and ethno-religious narratives to highlight LGBT small 't' troubles. And, that these changes are happening in Belfast (not in London or New York or Kampala) is significant: *the drag queens were on the steps of St. Anne's Cathedral in Belfast on Culture Night*, intentionally linking queer visibility, Protestant religion, artistic performance, and the city of Belfast in that moment in that *place*.



**Figure 17 Drag Queens on the steps of St Anne's Cathedral on Culture Night**



Figure 18 Rainbow flag outside Amavi café, Donegall Street



Figure 19 Belfast City Hall lit up for Belfast Pride 2014 <sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> © (EILE Magazine 2014)





Figure 20 Mural of lesbians kissing on Hill Street <sup>37</sup>

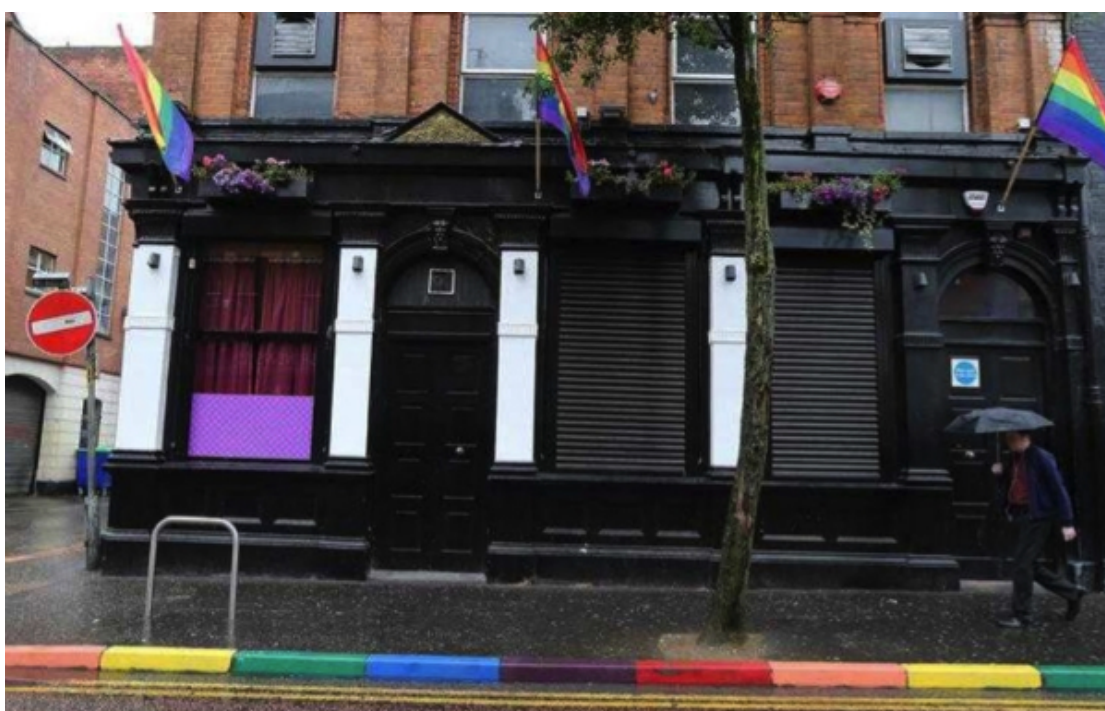


Figure 21 Rainbow-painted kerb stones Union Street <sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> © Hugh Russell. (McKeown 2016)

<sup>38</sup> © Hugh Russell. (Hughes 2016a)



**Figure 22 Advert on Royal Avenue for the Kremlin gay club**

Of course, the shaping of place is not the only way to campaign for queer visibility and Gareth is active in attempts to change legislation or defend hard-won rights, but for me his photograph of the LGBT-inscribed cranes demonstrates the symbolic importance to him of this place in the city of Belfast. De Certeau writes about the (then) iconic World Trade Centre in New York City as ‘a prow for Manhattan [which] constructs a fiction [that] makes the city readable’ (1988:92); equally, the Harland and Wolff cranes could also be seen as a prow for Belfast, the shipping metaphor even more apposite. But the ‘readability’ of the city through the

cranes depends on the perspective they are viewed from and who is doing the viewing. Gareth's photograph, along with the drag queens on the Cathedral steps, the lesbians-kissing mural or the rainbow-coloured kerbstones, are all symbolic ways of reshaping place to enable a different reading of the city, a queer reading. However, it is through Sam's story that I want to consider symbolism in more detail, by looking at how he makes the surfaces of the city more 'readable'.

### **Walking The City With Sam: The Symbolism Of Place**

I first met Sam when he gave a talk on the current and developing built environment in Belfast<sup>39</sup> and he is one of the most enthusiastic people I have ever met regarding the city's future. His interest in this began in 2007 when he recognised that Belfast was changing rapidly, as he explains here:

In the city centre [at that time] there was a lot of piecemeal redevelopment going on, public and private, [such as] the preparation work for Victoria Square [shopping mall]. I wasn't really aware of, or had any training in, architecture or planning – I was going through my first undergraduate degree in Law and Politics. I didn't even realise such a term as 'the built environment' existed but became very interested in finding out more. But it was very difficult to source that information. I'm somebody who really enjoys delving deep into a subject once I get an interest in it. And so, once I got some information I wanted more. I'm a real stickler for facts.

Sam now works for PLACE, a charity that is dedicated to promoting an understanding of [the] built environment (PLACE n.d.). He has established a successful website that details all planning applications and developments in Belfast (FutureBelfast n.d. a), and he works as a volunteer tour guide in the city. Adam Reed notes that an anthropological contribution to the study of cities might pay attention

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<sup>39</sup> 'The Contemporary City: Current developments, visions for the future'. Lecture on 3 June 2014. Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

to 'the different kinds of city that subjects constitute themselves' (2002:129). I consider here how Sam's knowledge of Belfast manifests itself particularly with regard to the symbolic importance he ascribes to particular places in the city.

Sam's growing interest in the built environment in Belfast coincided with the winding up of Laganside Development Corporation (LDC), a non-departmental public body set up by the Northern Ireland Office in 1989 with a brief to regenerate the Belfast waterfront, later extended to other parts of the city centre. LDC was very successful, leveraging £1 billion of investment over the eighteen years of its existence and engaging public and private bodies, as well as community representatives, in the planning and development process (Smith and Alexander 2001). LDC effected change to the economic, social and cultural environment, such as Waterfront Hall and Odyssey Arena (both hosting major cultural and popular events), Lanyon Quay (where BT and Hilton, among others, have prestigious offices and hotels), development of the Cathedral Quarter (with a focus on design, fashion and the arts), housing developments that mix high-value and social housing (Geography in Action n.d.), and the Gasworks complex, which included a training scheme for unemployed youth as well as redevelopment of a contaminated site into a thriving business park. Sam was enthusiastic about what LDC had achieved and he is not alone in that assessment: 'Laganside has redefined a sense of what is possible in Belfast' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2000:93) and demonstrated 'the capacity of a large-scale capital project to confront issues of poverty and exclusion' (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006:169).

As Sam's interest in city centre developments grew he worked as a volunteer at PLACE before becoming an employee. He wanted to know about future plans for the city but, as he said, discovered this was difficult to find. Although some information was available in planning applications or minutes of Council meetings, it was often out of date. So, as a hobby quite separate from his work, he began to log details of urban plans and development projects, expanding it into a website. As he says:

The resources out there were pretty sparse or not up to date or not [at the] level of knowledge I wanted or thought other people might want.

That's why I started to play around with Future Belfast [website] as an idea, as an online resource, never expecting that it would become such a mammoth thing that it has. So, for the last seven years it's become something of a self-funded passion. Now I've sourced a little bit of funding for it.

As his interest in the built environment became more widely known, he found that Council members, developers and other people would come to *him* for information. Thus, what began as a hobby has developed into a sophisticated website with up-to-date and easily searchable details on planning proposals and applications, and on area plans and strategic initiatives. Sam is keen to democratize the planning process as far as possible, to get people interested and involved in planning matters, so he has an active Twitter account and sends out a bi-monthly newsletter.

The second time I met Sam was on the day of the storywalk. We met at PLACE in Lower Garfield Street and, after a short recap on what my research is about he said, 'Ok. Let's go for a dander'. It was on this dander that the importance of symbolism to Sam became apparent. We began our walk in Castle Place with Sam pointing out the windows in Carroll's gift shop:

You see the windows on the first floor? The windowsills slope in so that you couldn't sit any incendiary devices on them, [and the] windows are quite thin because this area was prone to explosions. (...) You can see on the second floor though, the windows have been altered in recent years. Extended. It's quite ironic that it's now a tourist shop. It's quite symbolic. You've got this Troubles architecture with this new use in it. There's a number of buildings around Belfast actually, which have been specifically designed during the Troubles, for the context they were being built in. I find that quite interesting.





**Figure 23 Carroll's gift shop, Castle Place**

Sam mentioned symbolism several times in relation to specific buildings, for example, Castle Court shopping centre. This is in Royal Avenue, on the site of the former Grand Central Hotel, which was an imposing Victorian building, built in 1893. During the Troubles the hotel lay within the 'ring of steel', the security cordon around the city centre (Brown 1985:1), and by the early 1970s was no longer economically viable. So, in 1972 it was used as a British Army base. But the city centre was a primary target for the IRA bombing campaign against the British State (Brown 1985), and for loyalist retaliation, and in the early 1980s, despite the Troubles being far from over, the army left these particular barracks and the building was empty. Interestingly, for these times, an ambitious plan was launched resulting in Castle Court opening in 1987. Sam picks up the narrative:

The whole background to Castle Court I find really interesting, still finding out information and still completely engrossed in the symbolic nature of Castle Court as a piece of architecture and redevelopment. The Minister

for the Environment at the time, a direct rule minister [i.e. from the United Kingdom government], was really adamant that Castle Court would be this glass-fronted symbol of prosperity for Belfast, an optimistic kind of symbol. (...) This was the first time glass had been done on such a large scale. But if you look, a lot of that glass is all blacked out and the reason for that is because behind the glass it's entirely blast-proof blockwork. So it's a bit of a falsity in a way, it's all about the symbolic nature of this not-quite-post-conflict architecture.

A venture such as Castle Court would be unremarkable in other city centres, but Belfast was one of the last cities in the United Kingdom to develop this kind of shopping mall and the arrival of Debenhams and other high street stores was heralded as proof that Belfast had returned to some semblance of normality (Mooney and Gaffikin 1988), although if 'normality' means the absence of a bombing campaign it was another nine years before the Good Friday Agreement was signed.



**Figure 24 Glass frontage Castle Court shopping mall, Royal Avenue**

Basso (1996) notes that social life is conducted through the exchange of symbolic words and gestures. For example, my request to Sam to assist with my research is symbolic of his greater knowledge of this place and the wisdom I wanted him to impart to me. Symbolic exchanges like this are so common they go largely unnoticed. But in Belfast I heard many people many times refer to places or practices as explicitly 'symbolic'; thus, I deduce that symbolism has a particular resonance for people in the city. I too saw symbolism in many places. It was pure accident that the photograph opposite, which I took while out with Sam, shows an image of a Victorian building reflected in Debenham's glass front. My intention was merely to photograph the glass frontage as a visual documentary adjunct to Sam's story. Indeed, I did not notice the reflection until I placed the image in this text. But since text and image are now together, I 'see' in the photograph the ghost of the Grand Central Hotel and a symbolic battle between old and new, image and reality, past and present, hope and adversity. As John Berger (1995) notes, a photograph preserves a moment in time and does not, in itself, have a past or a future, thus it is ambiguous, leaving it open to a variety of meanings depending on who is viewing it.

'Symbolism in Northern Ireland is often a serious business (...) a focus for passionate loyalties [of] self-sacrifice or murder' (Buckley 1998:2). That serious business has an important place in post-conflict reconciliation too, such as the symbolic handshake between Queen Elizabeth II, whose uncle Lord Mountbatten was murdered by the IRA, and Martin McGuinness, then Deputy First Minister and former IRA commander (BBC 2012). Symbolism in the city is not just Troubles-related. For example, the Titanic Belfast building is shaped to symbolise the four prows of *Titanic* and *Olympic* (her sister ship built at the same time); the height of the museum is the same as the visible part of the iceberg that sank *Titanic*; the shiny frontage represents both ice and water; the small wooden benches that circle the building spell out, in morse code, the SOS signal that was sent from the ship as she was sinking; the huge copper-plated wall inside represents the rusting hull as she lies on the ocean floor (Costecalde and Doherty 2012). These are just a few of the many symbolic features of the museum.

Of course, 'symbols do not carry meaning inherently. They give us the capacity to make meaning' (Cohen 1987:16). So, although the architects chose those



particular symbols, and the tour guides are schooled into passing these ideas on, it is up to each individual to decide how they want to respond to those cues: this is why no place can be intrinsically meaningful. Sam's interest in the symbolic nature of some of the buildings in Belfast city centre is in what he sees as incongruous juxtapositions, such as a blast-proof, glass-fronted building built during the Troubles.

Symbolic forms are polysemic and multivocal (Buckley 1998); different individuals may derive different meanings from the same form and hence turn it into a different kind of symbol. For example, the Union Jack as the flag of a loyal subject or the flag of a colonial invader. The physical context of the symbolic form is relevant too, such as the gantry cranes viewed from a derelict wasteland or as seen next to Titanic Belfast. And meanings can change over time – an historical long view can provide useful analytic distance or be re-appropriated for modern needs (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). For example, Foster (2014a) draws interesting parallels between the sinking of the *Titanic* on 14/15 April 1912 and the destruction of the World Trade Centre (WTC) on 11 September 2001. 'Titanic' is now a marketed brand, through film, tourism and memorabilia, and although the cause was an accident, at the time of the disaster, its import and impact on either side of the Atlantic were akin to those following the act of terrorism that caused the WTC disaster. Meanwhile, a phrase I heard many times in Belfast was that 'The past is always present', referring to the way that the political import of historical events, such as the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, a 'minor' battle at the time (Simms 1974), and the 1916 Easter Rising, a failed coup (Martin 1968), are reified and reiterated each year for current political ends, that of unionism and Irish nationalism respectively. Although events surrounding 'the Twelfth' to remember the Boyne victory and Easter Sunday parades to remember the Rising are well attended, they are not significant to everyone. I met many people in Belfast who wanted nothing to do with either. Symbols are 'a means through which individuals grasp and express new and significant truths about their individual identities and about the world' (Buckley 1998:2), as a unionist may do on the Twelfth, as Gareth did to assert his identity as a gay man via the gantry cranes, and as Sam does with his enthusiasm for the built environment.

Sam also works as a volunteer tour guide and as we walked through the city centre he pointed out details that I would not otherwise have noticed, such as a

small sign on a wall that said 'Any vehicles left here would be towed away' – a leftover from the securitization of the city centre – or the marking on the side of a building that signified its modernist construction. Adam Reed saw this same fascination with detail in London tour guides who had 'a desire for depth, for engagement with the hidden layers' as a way to understand and communicate their vision of the city, a city the guides felt had a personality (2002:137). So, although Sam introduces me to the surfaces of the city, the glass-fronted shopping mall or the windows of the gift shop, he is taking me beneath that surface via the symbolic meaning he attaches to those places. De Certeau famously looked down from the World Trade Centre in New York City at the people below, whose movements were following the 'thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it' (1998:93). But Sam does read his urban text and in doing so wants to pass on to others – through lectures, his website and as a tour guide – what the surfaces of the city can tell us. Sam also makes specific reference to the character of the city and speculates as to how this comes about. We were walking down Hill Street,<sup>40</sup> a narrow, cobbled road that is still open to traffic, and he speculated on the streetscape:

The Cathedral Quarter [that] we're walking through is a really positive change to this area. When you're walking along [Hill Street], everyone feels like they're walking along a really attractive and vibrant street, they enjoy the space. But it's quite simple what's been done. Because the architecture, look at this building, it's sort of nineties architecture, there's nothing spectacular [about it], there's nothing amazing about it as architecture, it's in-fill development. So, when I'm walking down here I often wonder, it's not just the architecture that creates a successful streetscape or place. So, if it's not the architecture what is it? In some ways it's a kind of coming together of all the different things, the street itself, the materials used. These are not the original cobbles; there was a thought process that "we'll put this down to create a character".

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<sup>40</sup> Hill Street is also the site of the lesbians-kissing mural and the Black Box where the Tenx9 storytelling night is held (see Chapter Three).

Sam articulates here his sense of this place, walking down Hill Street in the Cathedral Quarter, and the complexity that makes up his experience. Zukin would call it 'public culture socially constructed on the micro-level' (1995:11) and she would argue there are many aspects to what for Sam is a 'successful streetscape': social encounters that make up daily life, the spaces these encounters occur in, and the power of architects or politicians to shape place physically (such as choosing to put cobbles down in Hill Street but not pedestrianizing it). Zukin believes that public space is inherently democratic: 'the question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended' (Zukin 1995:11). Yet she also suggests that this is controlled by some to the disadvantage of others, illustrating this through the redevelopment of Tompkins Square Park in New York City, where those who were deemed as dangerous, such as vagrants on the park benches, were pushed out to make way for cafés for the middle classes, what she describes as 'pacification by cappuccino' (Zukin 1995:28).

This link between development and who occupies space is evident in Belfast too. Since the mid 1980s, planning strategy has been used as a tool for 'the political management of the Troubles' (Neill 1995:56). Meanwhile, gentrification of the Cathedral Quarter was as much to attract tourism as to provide a focus for the arts (McManus and Carruthers 2014). For de Certeau, walking the city helps to 'weave places together' (1998:97). Sam's walking tour weaves a way through the city not only physically but imaginatively and temporally; he identifies signifiers of the past but also imagines a future city centre as a thriving residential area. I asked him if people wanted to live in the city centre. He replied:

I know I do. And I think I do because it's an active statement that I'm confident in the city and I want to see the city change for the better. And I know a lot of my friends, people with a similar outlook to me, would want to also. I know a lot of people who are very against the kind of, what some people describe as little boxes, which are the apartments that have gone up recently, which I would say are mainly from speculative development and not designed as quality living spaces. When you look at the top floors [of commercial premises], there's nothing on the upper

floors except for retail storage space or emptiness. [But] some of the old Victorian buildings are perfect for inner city living – high ceilings, big height windows. The Cathedral Quarter [doesn't have] a real, true 24-hour feeling because people aren't living [there] just yet. [But] it's at the university [of Ulster] where I see huge potential for this city in terms of repopulating it. (...) The redevelopment of the university is going to have a transformational impact on this area.

Ulster University has embarked on a £250 million investment in new academic facilities and student housing at their Belfast campus in York Street, close to the Cathedral, which will bring a footfall of approximately 15,000 students and staff to the area (Ulster University n.d.), a significant increase from the 2,000 students at the campus in 2014. The project is due to be completed in 2019, although news reports suggest this deadline will not be met (Doyle 2016). But as Sam points out to me, just bringing students into the centre is not enough. People need the right kind of facilities to live here:

The opening of Lidl's [supermarket] here is a positive sign for people living in the city again, because you need these kind of services to make it a viable place to live. (...) It shows optimism from a business point of view as well. I have to actually leave the city centre to find a GP, a dentist. What if you have a family living in the city centre? Where's the play park? You know, all these really vital things are missing. If you have a child in the city centre, where do you send them for primary school, secondary school? You have to send them out to the outskirts of the city or even another town! It's madness. [But] these are all things to be optimistic about and to lobby for, so instead of thinking of them as negatives I think of them as the next step to getting a better Belfast.

I believe that, for Sam, story and place are intimately intertwined in his positive outlook on the future and the meaning he gives to places, such as his interest in a tourist shop in a building designed for conflict, the fascinating

symbolism of a glass-fronted, blast-proof building built within the ring of steel, and the contemporary challenges to inner city living as something to be optimistic about and to fight for. Donnan's (2005) view that you have to know about *both* story and place to find your way around are apposite here: Sam's enthusiasm for a positive future is highlighted *because* he talks knowledgeably about conflict and the past, *because* he is intimately acquainted with Belfast City Council's sluggish bureaucratic procedures yet sees planning challenges as opportunities to lobby for the kind of city he wants to live in. Ian James (2003) found a similar enthusiasm for the urban environment, despite its drawbacks, in his research in Romford, England. But I also believe Sam's story supports Rapport's (2008) notion of individual meaning-making, since not everyone shares Sam's enthusiasm for the city centre.

Sam told me that his parents rarely explore the city other than to shop in Royal Avenue or Victoria Square shopping mall. When he took them on a walk around the streets just off Royal Avenue, behind Central Library and the Belfast Telegraph Office, they were slightly fearful, saying to him, 'Do you know what happened here?' – as they remembered the atrocities associated with the city centre during the Troubles. Andrea, a woman in her late twenties, told me a similar story. She lives in Carrickfergus, a small town (with a large Protestant population) twelve miles north of Belfast, and she drives in every day 'down past the Markets' (traditionally a Catholic area) to go to work. She often socialises in the Sunflower pub – behind the Belfast Telegraph building. Her mother is horrified, 'that used to be the *Tavern!*' and 'you drive through the Markets?' It is as though Sam's parents and Andrea's mother express no sense of belonging to the city centre, imbued as it is for them with past dangers, whereas younger people show a preference for city living (Neill et al. 2014).

I only met Sam twice – a brief discussion after his lecture and for an hour or so during the walk through the city centre. But in this brief encounter he conveyed strongly his interest in the past, his enthusiasm for the future, and his work in the present to influence that future. In this coming together of surfaces – Sam's presentation of himself to me and the city surfaces he brought to my attention – he tells us what the city means to *him* and conveys his sense of belonging to Belfast. However, to explore belonging in more depth I move on to Geraldine's story.

## **Belonging In Place: Geraldine At Belfast City Hospital**

I met Geraldine at the Linen Hall Library book club, which she facilitates, and after one of the meetings we chatted about my research, an interest in stories being an obvious connection between us. She agreed to do a storywalk and gave considerable thought to which place to choose, as the following emails demonstrate:

19<sup>th</sup> May 2014

Hello Karen

(...)

Re the story walk, I have thought it through and there is one, possibly two places of significance for myself and Belfast. One location is Belfast City Hospital, which is where I came to in January 1986 to take up my RGN Course having been away from Belfast since June 1968. The Nurses' Home was my home for three years. The other possible location is Riverdale Park West, which is between Andersonstown and Finaghy and this is where I lived from age 1 to 17 before leaving to live with my mother when my parents split up. After that I never again lived anywhere for more than three years until I bought my current home aged 51 years and have been here for going on 15 years. Am not sure why I was such a nomad, maybe talking to you about it will throw some light on the matter. You can let me know what you think re above, am happy for you to bring your dog along should you so wish.

Regards, Geraldine

Ten days later she narrowed it down to the hospital:

29<sup>th</sup> May 2014

Hi Karen

(...)

Re our planned walk about on Sunday, on reflection I think that it should be only the city hospital. My reason for choosing this location is that this was my home and place of work for three years after being away from Belfast for 18 years, and it gave me a career which allowed me to work as a nurse in Belfast for 18 out of the next twenty one years and to retire on a reasonable pension. It also introduced me to a complete new social circle as there were thirty of us in our intake group. It gave me the wherewithal to purchase my own house and eventually find the stability and a huge sense of belonging that had eluded me for almost forty years.

(...)

Regards, Geraldine



**Figure 25 Tower Block, Belfast City Hospital**

We met at the hospital entrance. As a young woman, Geraldine wanted to be a nurse but her mother forbade it; so instead she visited her sister in Canada and, as indicated in her emails, stayed for eighteen years, not settling down anywhere particular, before eventually returning to Northern Ireland when she was thirty-five. Driving to Newry one day, a small town near the border with the Republic of Ireland, she spotted an advert for nurse training: almost on a whim she drove straight back to Belfast and applied immediately. As we walked around Geraldine talked fondly of the hospital and the experiences she had there. Belfast's citizens sometimes deride the Tower Block that dominates the skyline in the south of the city, referring to it as a giant piece of Lego (a child's building brick), but for Geraldine it has special resonance. She began her training just as the Tower Block opened and she said it had the most modern hospital facilities in Belfast at that time: the Tower Block symbolised a new beginning for healthcare and a new beginning for Geraldine.

As we stood in front of the former Nurses' Home, now private apartments, she talked about the good friends she made, a few of whom she is still in contact

with. We walked around and through the hospital which, twenty-eight years earlier, had become for Geraldine a largely benevolent institution that provided work, home and friendships; a place to face adversity and death but also to welcome new life or rebuild broken ones; a place close to two local pubs, the Botanic Inn and the Eglantine, affectionately nicknamed 'the Bot' and 'the Egg', where student nurses had great nights out mingling with university students from Queen's. Although there was a hierarchy of power and importance within the hospital, with mostly male consultants at the top and mostly female student nurses languishing somewhere near the bottom, there was one area when a more egalitarian ethos prevailed. The hospital canteen was used by all staff: porters, staff nurses, junior doctors, student nurses, consultants, pharmacists, physiotherapists, phlebotomists, cleaners, catering staff, ward sisters, hospital administrators, occupational therapists, and nursing assistants, all sitting on separate tables in their work groups but sharing space, food and informal conversation as well as having the wellbeing of the patients in common. Geraldine was doing an important job, gaining new skills and knowledge, facing difficulties, making friends: it is easy to see why the three years that she spent here were so formative. She had various homes when she lived in Canada, describing her life as 'nomadic', whereas growing up she lived in the same home for seventeen years. Yet it was not until she came to City Hospital that she found *a sense of belonging* that had eluded her for nearly forty years, and it is this aspect of her story that I want to explore in more detail.

Edwards notes that 'belonging is forged through a variety of connections and a diversity of attachments, which include links to past and persons, as well as to places' (1998:148). Geraldine's newfound sense of belonging was strongly attached to this place, Belfast City Hospital, to its geographical location, the experiences she had and the people she met. The Tower Block symbolised modernity and new beginnings; the nurses' homes symbolic of the close friendships she made. Geraldine also expressed to me her sense of belonging to the UK National Health Service, the rewarding clinical career she forged and the ability it gave her to purchase her own home. On the storywalk, Geraldine saw Belfast City Hospital as the beginnings of a rootedness that had eluded her. 'To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul' (Weill 1952:41) and, as Lovell states,



‘Rootedness and rootlessness evoke conditions of existence which tend to stress the emotional gravity of place’ (1998:1). For her storywalk, Geraldine chose the hospital where she trained over the place of her birth because of the sense of belonging – the rootedness – that she had to the former.

The storywalk at City Hospital prompted other memories for Geraldine. For example, she told me about a ward sister who was quite horrible to her, angrily blocking Geraldine’s chance of promotion by refusing to release her for further training. The ward sister, whom she referred to throughout as ‘nasty sister’, was so angry at Geraldine’s request that she had her moved from the ward. Geraldine told me how upset she was by what would undoubtedly be recognised nowadays as bullying, but interestingly emailed me a few days after the storywalk with a coda:

4<sup>th</sup> June 2014

Hi Karen,

Thank you for the experience of telling a story, I really did enjoy it.

(...)

One aspect of my story that I did not tell you was, in relation to the "nasty sister " who declared "I will be obeyed" and had me transferred out of her department, that some seven years later she came to work as an agency nurse in the hospital where I was the Clinical Nurse Specialist (...). [We were both] caught off guard but I rose to the occasion by smiling warmly, acknowledging her and welcoming her to our department (...) and we went on to become almost friends over the next two years. In spite of our background history, I had huge respect for this lady's clinical practice and had learned much from her and her high standards of care that she had insisted on. (...) The irony of this situation was that by putting me out of her department in 1996 she triggered my move to England where I went on to develop my endoscopy skills and ultimately progressed to become a Nurse Specialist. Had she been supportive of me I may have been content to continue working under her as a D Grade Staff Nurse; instead I took early retirement from my specialist Grade H post. Every cloud.....

(...)

Regards, Geraldine

This demonstrates how place affects the personae we choose to present to someone, since both ‘nasty sister’ and Geraldine were presented to me in a different light in the final email to how they were on the storywalk. However, to explore that,

I need to consider the relationship between Geraldine and myself. Although we met at the book club, we had more than literature as a common interest: I also trained and worked as a nurse. Although I trained in a different country (England), on the storywalk we discovered great similarity in our experiences. Geraldine began her nurse training in 1986, eight years after me. We both did hospital-based training (not university-based as it is now) and we wore the horrid, blue-and-white checked polyester student nurse dresses with white paper caps – no starched caps allowed until we reached the heady heights of Staff Nurse. There were different coloured belts to denote seniority and on cold nights we wrapped ourselves in dark navy woollen capes with bright red lining.

Walking around the City Hospital grounds in 2014, three decades after we had trained, especially the areas that the public rarely saw, such as the sewing room, the clinical stores, 'Rose Cottage' (the euphemism for the mortuary), and one of the now-empty wards where Geraldine had once worked, Geraldine's memories led to stories that prompted my memories and my stories. I too had a great sense of belonging at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where I trained, but I also had a (false) sense of familiarity with City Hospital, as my own stories of nasty sisters and great nights out were brought forth. I did not know this hospital, but I knew of life and work in other hospitals and, as Geraldine and I swapped reminiscences and asked each other questions, storytelling-on-location meant that for both of us 'the dramatic pace of the account [was] quickened by being told on site' (Donnan 2005:95). Our imaginations were mutually engaged.



**Figure 26 Service area, Belfast City Hospital**

For example, on Geraldine's theatre placement as a trainee, Theatre Sister did not want her to hold any of the instruments. Geraldine has a fine tremor in her hands, a long-standing neurological problem. But a very kindly and wise surgeon said Geraldine would be just fine – which she was. This story prompted my imagination as I thought about my own experience in theatre, where you are the lowest on the hierarchical scale, lower than the cleaners because they are regular members of the team and know their job. Geraldine did not have to supply any other information for me to picture a scene: the no-attempt-to-disguise long-suffering look of Theatre Sister, only her eyes visible between mask and cap but effectively expressing her disdain for student nurses; the kindly, crinkly-eyed avuncular surgeon who won his small battle against Sister; and the tense, frightened student nurse, surrounded by strange sights and sounds and smells and a secret language of autoclaves and strangely named instruments. Ochs and Capps note that there is a difference

between telling a story *to* someone (such as we encountered at Tenx9, the public storytelling night) and telling a story *with* someone, as Geraldine and I were doing:

Everyday recounting of incidents, especially those that happened recently and those half-forgotten or repressed, often look like rough drafts rather than finished products. Narrators have something to tell, but the details and the perspectives are relatively inchoate; they are still in the middle of sorting out an experience.

(Ochs and Capps 2001:2)

As Geraldine and I told nursing stories to one another, her stories became intertwined with my memories and imagination (and vice versa) as the story became 'differently signified in the minds of individual listeners' (Jackson 2005:358), our inner dialogues transformed to social discourse and back again to inner dialogues, connecting ourselves with ourselves as well as with each other. As one story sparks another we triggered in each other 'new personal or professional insights' (Wulff 2012:163), such as when Geraldine sought to understand why she had a nomadic lifestyle and I sought an understanding of the link between story, place and a sense of belonging.

Our shared experiences made this a different kind of storywalk from the ones I undertook with other storytellers. For example, I had noticed Geraldine's tremor before but had never referred to it, as it seemed too personal a question. But in this place – the hospital – Geraldine and I were no longer just research participant and anthropologist, or book club facilitator and member. We conversed nurse to nurse and a brief, unemotional, medical explanation and acknowledgement was socially appropriate. Being in this place shaped the stories that were told and the performance of ourselves to each other changed (i.e. we became nurses again) *because* of the place we were in.

When we finished our walk and I unpinned the lapel microphone, I asked Geraldine if storytelling-on-location was different for her from, say, sharing stories over a cup of coffee in a café. She said it was completely different, and much more enjoyable, as she had an emotional re-engagement with the stories. This could

explain why she shared with me how upset she was with ‘nasty sister’: she was re-experiencing those emotions (Svašek 2006) while talking to a fellow nurse.<sup>41</sup> Once we left the hospital, went to our respective homes and whatever activities we had planned over the next few days, Geraldine and I presented to each other as research participant and anthropologist: Geraldine felt bad that she had not presented ‘nasty sister’ in her entirety, since they became ‘almost friends’ and Geraldine ‘respected this lady’s clinical practice (...) and her high standards of care’ when they worked together several years later.

The value of storywalk-as-method is as a sensorial prompt for memory and imagination, an active engagement between storyteller and story-hearer, and a record of how the person told the story to me on the day. This does not devalue stories told otherwise but it does focus on verbatim words and in-place sensations. However, the method is not fool-proof. Geraldine’s storywalk was significant for me in another way as I foolishly failed to record our conversation. I do not know whether I plugged the microphone into the wrong socket, or turned the recording volume down instead of up, but a week after the storywalk I discovered I had one hour and forty minutes of recorded silence. It had occurred to me during the storywalk that I was a storyteller too and therefore I was looking forward to transcribing our conversation to see what insights this might yield. Although this was not as dramatic a fieldwork problem for me as, say, Srivinas’s (2012) loss of all his fieldnotes, I was too embarrassed to tell Geraldine as I did not want her to feel she had wasted her time, even though by then she had emailed to say how much she enjoyed herself. I needed a salvage operation. Initially I scribbled down, as quickly as I could, everything that I remembered of what Geraldine had told me but it was clear from the number of words I had that this was not one hour and forty minutes’ worth of recollection. So, I decided to use my fieldwork method to help me. I went back to City Hospital and ‘recreated’ the storywalk for myself, remembering the remembering.

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<sup>41</sup> Svašek clarifies that ‘re-experienced’ does not imply ‘exactly the same way as in the past’ but that the feelings are influenced by ‘present-day predicaments’ (Svašek, 2006:200).

The value of a transcript is that it represents a true record of a person's words (presuming, of course, that the words are truthfully transcribed and that this is believed by the reader), so I began to question what the lack of a 'true record' meant for my data. Reliance on technology is a weakness as well as a strength of my chosen method. In addition, I do not always leave it entirely up to the storyteller to choose their storyplaces: when I asked Gareth to go to the docks with his LGBT-doctored image it was because I already had in mind another photograph: that of him in front of the cranes with the original one. Gareth is shaping place to tell his story and, in turn, I am shaping that place for the story in my dissertation. He took his original photograph in 2006 and thereafter it languished in the Queerspace drop-in centre, propped up on the back of a sofa, while he engaged in other campaigns and creative projects. So, is my 2014 performance – the staging of a photo-with-a-photo – somewhat 'inauthentic' because it is my story not Gareth's? As I did not record Geraldine's stories and some of her nursing experiences were similar to mine, how much accuracy can I claim, say, with the story of Theatre Sister, when I have a conflation of Geraldine's story, my memories and my imagination? Where does the storyteller's veracity begin to meld into my verisimilitude as these stories become 'actively reworked' by me (Jackson 2006:15)?

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in Chapter Three, a story is a construction, a piecing together of events in a sequence they do not have in life. A story is a way to make meaning. Telling a story in place does not make it any more truthful than if Gareth, Geraldine and Sam had told me those stories sitting in an office or a pub, but it does make their stories more immediate on the day and one is not relying only on verbal communication. As Ochs and Capps state, 'Settings have the potential to go beyond simply contextualizing events – they may explain them as well' (2001:130). So maybe the storywalks I undertake with people, whether they are recorded and transcribed or not, become a different kind of truthfulness. The mixing of stories and place – such as Gareth's original photograph and my staging of the photograph – is not inauthentic: if place-meaning is made by people, as Rapport suggests, then I was as

much a part of those places on the storywalks as were Gareth, Sam and Geraldine. Although my primary focus is in the meaning *they* imbue place with, it would be inauthentic to suggest that *only* their stories were being told or enacted.

Gareth, Sam and Geraldine chose to tell me these particular stories – of the cranes and gay visibility, of conflict architecture and an optimistic future, of the hospital and belonging – in these particular ways and at these particular times, and I do not necessarily know why they chose to do so. Geraldine was explicit in hoping that the storywalk would help her *to understand* her previous nomadism. Although I asked Gareth to go to the docks and Sam wanted to share his enthusiasm for buildings, they may all have had other, undeclared reasons for the storywalk, for example, a desire to revisit old haunts or to help with my research. As Jackson says, storytelling not only ‘makes sociality possible, it is equally vital to the illusory, self-protective, self-justifying activity of individual minds’ (Jackson 2006:15).

To return to Donnan’s and Rapport’s quotations, on the relationship between story and place and between the socio-cultural and the individual, it would seem, with the ethnographic examples I have chosen, that story and place are indeed intertwined: you do have to know about both to understand better how Gareth, Sam and Geraldine gave these places meaning. The history of the cranes and LGBT rights in Northern Ireland are integral to how Gareth explained his photograph vis-à-vis his identity as a gay man and his political position on gay visibility. Similarly, Sam’s enthusiasm for the future of the city is relevant not just to the buildings but their past, present and future uses for the people who occupy them. Meanwhile Geraldine demonstrates how story is connected to the wider concept of place; not just the geographical location of the hospital but of the memories she has, and the people she met, the real and imagined communities (Anderson 2006) of health care professionals. Although I chose to focus on senses of belonging in Geraldine’s story, this can be expanded to the others too: Gareth is asserting that, as a gay man, he belongs in Belfast and Sam alludes to belonging in his desire to live in a thriving city centre. Thus, I argue that place has shaped the stories they told and the stories they told shape place. As Basso notes:

What people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth, and while the two activities may be separable in principle, they are joined in practice.

(Basso 1996:7)

It could be said that the method I have chosen, that of storytelling-on-location, makes the links between the two, á la Donnan, a self-fulfilling prophecy. So I ask whether stories could be placeless? Marc Augé (1995) would argue that if place is everywhere, as Casey suggests, then the definition of place becomes meaningless and in fact it is nowhere. In addition, Augé states that transient places, such as a hotel room, have no significance and are therefore non-places. But I do not subscribe to this view. The place from where Gareth took his photograph (the street) would, in Augé's terms, be a non-place, yet Gareth took me back to exactly the spot from where he took the photograph: this place was significant for him. 'To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the place one is in' (Casey 1996:18), although Rapport would counter that one's 'locale' could be a sense of being a mere spot on the Universe.

A second challenge to Donnan's assertion that story and place are integrally bound is to ask if places can exist without stories? Here I would have to accept that yes, they can, particularly if one considers the natural environment, since that preceded humankind and thus preceded stories, although that presupposes that 'place' as opposed to 'space' can exist without people. Regardless, once place is peopled – and many places are – then there are stories associated with place even if one is not in that place. For the Western Apache, storytelling forges enduring bonds between the individual and the natural environment: 'How stories work to shape Apaches' conceptions of the landscape is also a model of how stories shape Apaches' conceptions of themselves' (Basso 1996:40-41). Likewise for the Dogrib in Northwestern Canada, story and place are intimately bound together as a way of knowing (Legat 2008). I suggest this is true for Gareth, Sam and Geraldine. However, it is not my intention here to reify place. I am *not* suggesting that knowing is *only* achievable through place. One can learn from reading a book, and although the book



is read somewhere – a library, a park bench, in the bath – the particular location is not necessary for that knowing to occur.

Moving on to Rapport's assertion – that the socio-cultural is the stolen essence of the personal – to what extent do these stories-in-place concur with that statement? With regard to place-meaning being an individual endeavour, that argument has, I believe, already been established. Objects and geographical sites cannot make meaning in and of themselves, otherwise multiple meanings would not be possible, and multiple meanings abound in Belfast, such as the example I gave of attitudes towards the Union Jack. This harks back to Simmel's (1971; 1980) work on the conceptual distinction between objects and places and the relationships between them (forms) and their meanings (content). Individuals give meaning to forms in order to give sense and significance to their own lives (Rapport and Overing 2007). This can extend to changing forms to impose content, as Gareth did:

The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through their own conceptual or partial acts of re-imagination, means that space and place can never be "given".

(Gupta and Ferguson 1992:17)

Rapport believes strongly in the individual's ability to adopt the position they choose, even if that is one of helplessness or feeling out of control, and he 'reserve[s] the right for [himself] to distinguish between a personal rhetoric of powerlessness and a powerlessness determined by others' (2003:5). He states that individuals transcend place, a view that Michael Jackson describes as refusing 'to explain individuals in terms of those limiting conditions of history, ethnicity, culture and biology' (2003:xi). But if story and place are intertwined, as I have argued, then one cannot dismiss entirely those limiting conditions. Place-meaning is placed *within* history, social environment etc. Sam is enthusiastic for the future *despite* the city's history. Wenger suggests that by living in the world, 'we do not just make meanings up independently of the world, but neither does the world impose meaning on us' (1998:53-54). This acknowledges Rapport's focus on the individual but not to the exclusion of place.

Finally, when considering Rapport's 'stolen essence' one must ask just what is being stolen and who are the thieves? With regard to the latter part of this question, Rapport is clearly accusing structuralists, such as Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss, who assert that individuals are the products of groups and of society (Rapport 2008). But as society is made up of individuals, does anyone enforce or impose the 'socio-cultural'? One could argue that, in Belfast, those with extremely conservative political/religious views combined with political power, such as the DUP, try to impose their world views on homosexuals and transgendered people by continually refusing to legislate for LGBT rights unless forced otherwise by a higher authority, such as the Supreme Court. This denial of rights can be seen an attempt to steal an essence of LGBT people – the opportunity to express their queer or transgendered identity on an equal footing with other citizens. But the individual can still fight back, as Gareth and many others do. Likewise, the grand narratives of Troubles and post-conflict are still omnipresent in public and academic discourse in Belfast, implying, through the attention given to them, that these are the most important discourses. But *many* people I spoke to in the city welcomed my interest in Not-the-Troubles and were happy to work with me. I was told many times that it was important that ordinary and everyday stories were told. The Troubles are not excised from the city imaginary, as Sam's story revealed, yet people tell each other stories of quotidian life all the time and have always done so. If one accepts the argument that essences are being stolen, then I assert that academic focus on the Troubles steals a non-Troubled rendering of the city but that individuals reassume this stolen essence, as illustrated through Gareth's, Sam's and Geraldine's stories. My findings are that while Donnan's and Rapport's statements on the integration between story and place and the socio-cultural thief are not mutually exclusive, neither are they completely coterminous.

The ethnographic chapters thus far have alluded to, but not examined, stories as performance. However, in the next chapter, performance takes centre-stage.

## Chapter Five

### JOSIE, THE MIRROR AND ME

#### Embodied Storytelling

Student Discount Day at the hairdressers and I'm at the sink with my head tipped backwards in an uncomfortable position.

'So, what are you studying then?'

Josie's seemingly disembodied voice, above and behind me, is accompanied by warm water running through my hair.

'Anthropology.'

'What's that then?'

I never have a satisfactory answer to The Anthropology Question so I say something about studying other cultures in order to understand them.

'Studying Indians like?'

'Well, that's not what I'm doing but it can be...'

'Oh, I would find that very difficult! What about them Indians that marry their girls off at eight years of age! To old men!! It's legal in their country to marry at eight and we just have to accept it. That's rape, so it is.'

At this point the hairwashing becomes vigorous, Josie's fingers pressing hard into my scalp while my head bobs around. All I can see is the corner of the room where the wall meets the ceiling. Josie continues talking rapidly...

*(How am I going to respond? I only came in for a haircut but this is obviously an Ethnographic Moment. This must be what happens on fieldwork. I need to think quickly but that's difficult because she's talking so rapidly...)*

'I had a client, a social worker from London. She told me about it. The parents sell their children and send them over to England. Girls of eight years of age married to old men. In Wimbledon!! Well, I thought it was all strawberries and cream but the social worker says you'd be surprised what happens in Wimbledon.'

*(I want to know what she thinks, but if I come across all liberal or academic it might temper what she says.)*

‘It’s in their culture. That’s what the social worker said. She wasn’t happy about it but her manager said, “It’s part of their culture,” so she has to accept it. Eight years of age!! Child abuse.’

By now, Josie is vigorously towelling my hair dry and she leads me into the salon, sits me down before a large mirror. We’re the only people in there. I look at Josie in the mirror where she towers above me. She’s in her forties I’d say and her blond hair is beautifully coiffured, set off by her smart black clothes. I look at myself. Beyond mid-fifties, wet hair plastered unflatteringly on my head, a voluminous black gown covering me *and* the chair. Not a pretty sight. But I’m jerked back to Josie.

‘The social worker said that some of the girls had a rash on their wee bottoms. Know what it was?’ and she stood stock still, looking at me through the mirror, waiting for my reply.

‘No, what was it?’

‘Beard rash! Can you believe it?’ and with this Josie cuts my hair while she continues with her story, the scissors snipping furiously.

*(OK. Minimal responses to keep the conversation going. I must commit all of this to memory.)*

Josie’s gestures are expansive; waving her arms around and there’s something about the way she moves her body that reminds me of a silent film actress, her movements and facial expressions are exaggerated, although silent she certainly is not. But occasionally she stops quite still. Scissors and comb hover above my head as she looks at me in the mirror and, depending on what she’s saying, I nod or shake my head or say something anodyne like ‘Oh really?’

*(Oh really! But it will have to do.)*

Josie continues, cutting and combing and talking. Although it was six weeks since she heard the social worker’s story she’s still upset about it and it’s changed how she sees the Indian population here in Belfast. She’s been going round looking in all the prams to see if children are abused. Josie stops cutting my hair while she acts out this scene, pulling an imaginary blanket away from an imaginary child.

‘I’m looking in at all the children, mothers clutching onto the prams,’ and she clutches the imaginary pram with a frightened expression on her face, ‘they probably think I’m going to steal their children, probably think, “What does this blonde white

woman want with my child?” Well, it’s not real of course, chemical highlights, but they don’t know that.’

*(This is intense. Her performance is constantly interrupting her cutting my hair. Or is cutting my hair interrupting her performance? And it’s all played out in the mirror...)*

Josie returns to cutting my hair, telling me about an advert on the telly to raise money to keep these children in education. But she would film it differently; maybe have the child looking wistfully over her shoulder at her parents. Josie looks wistfully over her own shoulder before turning back to look at me in the mirror.

‘That would get the money in. How much do you want off your fringe?’

We agree on just a smidgeon cut off and, barely pausing for breath, Josie launches into her views on Romanians, begging on the streets: they’re not skinny so they can’t be starving, see that sandwich shop across the road – they go hoking around in the bins with babies on their backs, eighteen of them living in one house, Council ought to stop it, they’ve all got gold fillings in their teeth why don’t they flog one of those, one man runs into the salon shouting “Politzia! Politzia!” to warn the customers about the traffic warden, he’s OK, we give him sandwiches and coffee but not money, you don’t know what they’re going to do with it do you?

The doorbell tinkles just as Josie says she’s nearly finished. Through the mirror I see a young Chinese couple in reception with a small child. Josie gets the lamps to dry my hair, sets the timer then goes to speak to the new people. I pick up a book but watch through the mirror.

*(Is this participant observation? It feels uncomfortable.)*

I watch as the man shows her a picture on his phone, presumably the hairstyle he wants. She leads him into the salon and now I can see them directly. Josie quickly, quietly and professionally cuts the man’s hair, her movements entirely in keeping with haircutting and not at all dramatic. She speaks occasionally to the woman while the small child hides shyly behind her mother’s legs. The haircut is soon over, they pay and leave.

PING!

The lamp timer goes off and Josie comes back.

‘There we are, all done’ and she smiles broadly.

‘So, will you be a doctor then?’ she says to me through the mirror.

‘Well, yes, hopefully,’ I say, and she uses a small mirror to show me the back of my head. Then Josie looks at me directly.

‘So, are you like writing a book then?’

‘Yes, it’s like a book so... I guess I am.’

‘Well, you’ll be writing about this mad hairdresser now!’

### **Understanding Josie**

My hairdressing experience with Josie was quite unexpected. It was the first time I had been to this salon, and Josie and I were alone for most of the thirty minutes or so that I was there. From my past experience, conversations initiated by hairdressers, particularly at the first appointment, usually begin (and often end) with ‘standard’ questions about where I went on holiday or reference to current television programmes, and would I like to look at some magazines while my hair dries. This would be typical and entirely expected in the context of urban superficiality and the briefness of encounters. But Josie did not conform to this ‘norm’: the unwritten contract between hairdresser and customer, on this occasion, was not a standard one. Josie launched straight into her stories – about child brides from India and Romanian immigrants – and they were extravagantly performed.

In using the term ‘performance’ I rely here on Richard Bauman’s definition (quoted in Wulff 2001:118) as ‘an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience’ (R.Bauman 1992:41); and I apply this definition to telling personal stories. Storytelling is intrinsically performative, since there is always an audience, even if the audience is oneself; stories have inherent narrative structures that frame the telling (discussed in Chapter Three); and it is a heightened mode of communication because the purpose of the performance is to engage the audience. Thus, all storytelling is performed to some extent. Storytelling is embodied, cognitive, emotional and situational (Hydén 2013), not only for the storyteller but also the listener. For example, the storyteller will use gestures as well as words, the story may ignite emotions in the listener that relate to another event, and the place where the story is told – a winter’s evening in a warm room with a roaring fire or a noisy

and busy street corner on a rainy day – can affect how the story is received. Josie's stories were told in front of a large mirror and this set up *a complex set of relationships* between bodies and images, and the *performative* aspects of her stories were so much to the fore in our encounter that I will use her story – our story – to explore them in more depth.

Why did Josie tell these stories in this way to a stranger, and who was she performing for? Was her comment on my writing about 'this mad hairdresser' a plea or a suggestion? What anthropological knowledge was learnt in this encounter and how is this knowledge created and disseminated? To answer these questions my analysis is threefold. First, I will use a theatrical trope to consider how Josie's embodied performance enables her to tell stories that convey how strongly she felt but also as a way compete with the grand narratives that Belfast has come to be known by. Second, I explore sensory experience as a form of knowing, and apply this to my role as a fieldworker. Finally, I interrogate my attempts to disseminate cognitive and sensory knowledge as anthropologist-performer and as anthropologist-writer. Performance is the thread that holds the chapter together; Josie's performance as a hairdresser, my performance as an anthropologist, and *our* performance in the mirror. For Hastrup, human beings are social to the core, thus the creativity of performance 'is a profoundly *social* fact' (2005:5, original emphasis).

Although performance is often closely associated with ritual (Turner 1982; Hughes-Freeland 1998) and hair salons are sites of ritual processes (Majors 2003; Cardoso 2012), I do not explore ritual in this chapter, since I want to focus on the actual performance itself and the knowledge that this generates. In the moment in the salon, the most striking aspect of the encounter was its dramatic quality. Josie's gestures were expansive and most of this was played out in front of a large mirror before an audience of two – Josie and me. I felt I could have been watching a play. Josie's account of the social worker's story and her views on the Romanians she encountered in the street were as much about the way she used her body as it was about her words. Although Goffman (1990) identified that we all perform in our social interactions, Josie's movements and words were more exaggerated than one would normally expect in an encounter between strangers or between a hairdresser

and her customer. This gave the interaction an air of theatricality and heightened the impact of her words on me.

The hairdressing encounter was an emotional engagement both for Josie and for me: Josie was upset about the Indian children and Romanian immigrants and I was startled, shocked and fascinated by her performance, not to mention uncomfortable about my own unexpected role in the action. I had merely gone into the salon to get a haircut (somewhat naively thinking that this was a routine task rather than ‘fieldwork’, something I will explore later). But from the moment that Josie asked me The Anthropology Question I realised this could be an ethnographic moment (Redfield and Friedman 2009) and I had to make a decision – in the moment – about how to react. I was no longer just a passive customer but a customer-turned-ethnographer who was acting as a customer and with a different level of interest and engagement in the proceedings. I chose not to offer any alternative views, as I wanted to hear Josie’s thoughts and concerns without undue influence from me, although I acknowledge (and later explore) that my minimal responsiveness in itself influenced the outcome. This drew my attention to the sensory impact of the encounter: just as Josie’s body was integral to the storytelling, my body and *the sensory knowledge I gained in the moment* is integral to my analysis.

The half-hour that Josie and I spent together appeared, from my point of view, to fall into three distinct phases: hairwashing and haircut; Josie’s interaction with the new customers; and finishing my hair and ending the appointment. In theatrical terminology, the structure of the performance was in three Acts (Pickering 2005). Thus, the final section of the chapter considers how best I may myself disseminate knowledge of this encounter, and I recount a theatrical performance of this ‘ethnographic moment’ that I re-enacted while giving a paper at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. In doing so I consider the effectiveness (or not) of my written attempts to re-present the encounter in three different styles: as a descriptive and dialogic narrative; as a disjointed piece of writing where the visual impact of the words is part of the meaning-making; and as a play. This leads to repetitiveness in the ethnographic vignettes, which precede each of the three main sections of the chapter, somewhat reminiscent of Queneau’s *Exercises in Style* (1958), and my intention here is to underscore the impact of the ethnographic



moment for me by bombarding the reader with the same information (see also Wolf 1992).

### ***Embodied performance***

There were several ways in which Josie's performance was 'theatrical' – and by that I mean more dramatically performed than one would expect in an encounter between a hairdresser and a customer. I will focus particularly on gestures, speech pattern and staging, although in separating out Josie's movements and speech for analysis I do not intend to privilege one over the other. Embodied practice holistically incorporates cognitive, emotional, verbal and non-verbal practices (Spatz 2015) and, of course, one could say that this applies to all interpersonal communication, but it was the *intensity* of this practice that made Josie's performance appear to be so theatrical, and I seek here to understand why she told the stories in this way. Uta Hagan notes that actors will often draw deeply on their own emotional memories to aid in their physical characterisation (Hagen and Frankel 1973). This suggests that Josie's shock about the discovery of child brides and her emotional reaction to it fuelled her performative re-telling some six weeks later, such that it became more dramatic and theatrical.

The most obviously dramatic aspects of Josie's performance were her gestures and how she used her body. For example, the juxtaposition of her movements sometimes created dramatic tension, such as when she oscillated between rapid and energetic combing and scissor-snipping, during which she was looking at my hair, to standing quite still, sometimes with the scissors and comb hovering above my head, as though pausing for dramatic effect, and at these times Josie looked at me through the mirror. Acting out looking into prams or remaking the television advert also served as theatrical devices to emphasise her story.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, nuanced glances are a commonly understood signal between strangers (Goffman 1963); thus, only small gestures are required to add meaning to the words we speak to one another, and these actions are usually at a subconscious level. But Josie's facial gestures were particularly exaggerated; she was almost gurning at times as in a pantomime. Although an actor can convey emotion through their words, for example by using prosody, rhythm etc., to convey a

character convincingly the actor uses gesture and movement, 'elaborating, improving, perfecting (...) becoming the very character yourself' (Chekhov 2002:68; see also Sher 1985). In a close-up shot in film or on television this can be done through the most nuanced flicker of the eyes (Auslander 2008). However, on stage the actor has to project to the furthest reaches of the theatre: 'your entire awareness as an actor is directed not inwardly to the self but outwardly, through action, into the scene' (Benedetti 1981:5). When Josie told me about the gold fillings that Romanian street-beggars had, she opened her mouth wide and stood still for a few seconds, as if to demonstrate that *she* had no gold fillings. Despite the fact that Josie and I were next to each other and the mirror provided a close-up shot, this gesture would have reached the farthest corner of a theatre. What could Josie's gesture have meant? Jackson says that:

[B]ody movements often make sense without being intentional in the linguistic sense, as communicating, codifying, symbolising, signifying thoughts or things that lie outside or anterior to speech. Thus an understanding of a body movement does not invariably depend on an elucidation of what the movement stands for.

(Jackson 1983:329)

But as Geertz (1973) noted, a wink or a twitch of the eye can have multiple meanings and one needs a context from within which to interpret it. In the context of Josie's expressed views on Romanian migrants I read her exaggerated facial gesture as a marker of her moral indignation, a way to express her incredulity that someone begging would have gold fillings.

### ***Verbal performance***

Turning now to Josie's verbal performance, much of her speech was in the form of monologue. In the theatre, this device enables the actor to reveal the character's inner thoughts to the audience or to provide a commentary on the action, as a kind of stream of consciousness (Pickering 2005). Josie's words did both. One particular quality of Josie's monologues was the juxtaposition of comedy and seriousness. For

example, when she first told me about the Indian girls she contrasted child abuse with strawberries and cream in Wimbledon, and her delivery was intentionally comedic when she said: 'You'd be surprised what happens in Wimbledon!' In the midst of acting out looking for signs of child abuse among foreign children, she suddenly announced, self-deprecatingly, that she had chemical highlights in her hair; but then commented, comedically, that the Indian women would not realise this (a ludic combination of words and gestures). Likewise, immediately after recounting her version of the television advert, which she thought would raise more money to save girls from abusive situations, she asked if I wanted anything cutting off my fringe. This was a necessary professional question with regard to my haircut, yet in all three of these examples there was a Shakespearean quality, as comedy in tragedy serves to highlight the serious issue or is used to relieve tension (Nason 1906). Jackson identifies the use of comedy and tragedy in Kuranko storytelling, whereby the former acts to give 'a liberating sense of distance from a radically contradictory situation' (Jackson 2006:174). Josie's comedic moments meant that she could acknowledge a practice she found abhorrent but was unable to do anything about.

My decision to use the word 'culture' in explaining anthropology acted as a trigger for Josie's story, since she reported that the social worker had been told she had to accept the practice of child-brides because it was part of Indian culture, and Josie's beliefs about the rights of the child to be protected from harm trumped what she perceived had been promoted as a 'cultural right'. Richard Bauman notes that verbal performance can vary in intensity and refers to the Chamula, who have three types of speech; ordinary speech (which is unremarkable), pure speech (which is more formal) and 'speech for people whose hearts are heated' where utterances are repetitive as well as intensively delivered (R.Bauman 1975:297). Josie repeated herself often, spoke rapidly and used changes in tone and volume for emphasis. Personal narratives can often demonstrate the teller's moral stance, particularly if the story being told is of a protagonist who has 'violated social expectations' (Ochs and Capps 2001:46). Storytelling in this case being an opportunity to clarify what the teller values. But if Josie wanted to find out if my heart was heated too about what she saw as a social violation, I failed her on this account, and my ordinary speech patterns, driven by my choice to remain neutral on these subjects, could have

encouraged Josie's dramatic performance. I did not react much to her statements, in particular about Romanian migrants, because I wanted to hear her views without them being tempered by mine, and I felt very uncomfortable with some of the things she said. Josie could have interpreted this as silent acquiescence on my part, or silent disapproval, but it could also have been a source of frustration for her, thus encouraging ever more dramatic statements and movements as she tried to get a reaction out of me. But I was performing too.

Adam Reed (in dialogue with Andrew Irving) notes that Stanislavskian Method actors focus less on voice and mannerisms to convey character, drawing instead on their own interiority to become someone other, and thus make their acted role believable. He applies this to anthropologists in the field: sometimes their non-judgment needs to be a performance in order to set aside their own values and be open to others (Irving and Reed 2010). I could have performed such that I agreed with all that Josie said, since that may have encouraged her to say more, but that would have compromised some of my own views, so I drew on my interiority to remain calm and neutral. Hastrup refers to this as 'double agency', where an actor (or in my case an anthropologist) works on 'becoming' and 'being' at the same time (Hastrup 1998:40).

Michael Chekhov notes that a compelling performance 'arises out of *reciprocal action* between the actor and the spectator' (2002:48, original emphasis). Although Josie's and my verbal (and bodily) performances were very different, they fuelled each other: the more extravagant Josie became, the more controlled I became and vice versa. Storytellers often 'strive to represent themselves as decent, ethical persons who pursue the moral high ground in contrast to certain other protagonists in their narratives' (Ochs and Capps 2001:284), and Josie's moral stance with regard to Romanian immigrants was different from mine. We both wanted to maintain the moral high ground: Josie chose to do this with an emotional performance, I chose to do it by not concurring with her views and remaining relatively silent. In this way our performances interacted with and fuelled each other.

### ***The Mirror***

The most important piece of ‘theatrical set design’ in the salon was the large mirror. It was the stage on which we watched the performance, a view that was constrained by the edges of the mirror in the way that a proscenium arch frames and constrains the action on a theatre stage. In a theatre, there is an imaginary ‘fourth wall’, characterised by the proscenium arch, which acts as a barrier between audience and performers. The audience sees through it to the action on stage but the actors pretend that they cannot see the audience (Hinckley 2008). Maintaining the fourth wall helps to create an impression of a different reality on stage, that it is a different time and place, and when this is intentionally breached, for example, if the actors address the audience directly or some of the action of the play takes place in the auditorium, it serves to engage the audience *in* the action, *in* the play. The audience become ‘spect-actors’, a phrase coined by Augusto Boal, Director of Theatre of the Oppressed, who actively encouraged audience members to break the fourth wall in order to change the narrative arc of a play (Souto-Manning 2010:140).

The mirror reflected Josie and me such that we could see the action played out on the mirror-stage, but the mirror’s trick is to give the impression that one steps through the looking-glass and into the action (Fernandez 1986): as a fourth wall it was constantly breached. Thus was I drawn into Josie’s performance, reinforcing my spect-actor role of customer/researcher, actor/audience. As a mediatory device the mirror gave the appearance that we were looking directly at each other, even though Josie was above and behind me but, as Polhemus (1988) notes, two people and a reflective device sets up a complex set of relationships. No longer were Josie and I just two bodies in close physical proximity, as we were by the sink (primarily hairdresser and customer), we could now see each other in the mirror and see ourselves at the same time (more obviously actors and audience). We had a relationship with our own image. For example, I felt uncomfortable with mine, adding to my discomfort about my dual roles. We had a relationship with each other’s image – I could see, as well as hear, the scissors flying around in Josie’s hands and she could see my impassive reaction to her stories. The images had a relationship to each other: the mirror as mediatory device facilitated conversation through the illusion that we were looking directly into each other’s eyes. Reflections

in mirrors lend themselves to the duality of the subjective-self viewing itself as an object (Fernandez 1986): we act and we see ourselves acting. With regard to Josie, the mirror and me, this then begs the question for whom was the performance being played?

Some studies on hairdressing salons comment on the exchange of stories between hairdressers and their customers, but the focus appears to be largely one-way traffic – that the customer tells stories and shares confidences with the hairdresser but not the other way around (Abiala 1999; Gimlin 1996; Bolles 2004). Yet this was not the case with Josie. Moreover, a study of two hairdressing salons in central London identified that the architecture and design of the salon was important to showcase the employees, a salon Director stating that ‘the people who are working, moving, the way they talk, the way they move their hands [makes] the salon’ (Chugh and Hancock 2009:469). When I went for a haircut at the Toni and Guy Academy in London (one of the hairdressing colleges for this international chain of salons), the student hairdressers were taught to use the mirror as a tool to help them check the correct positions of their bodies and hands. All of this suggests that Josie would be very aware of her own image in the mirror and thus of her own performance.

[In everyday life] there is a clear understanding that first impressions are important. Thus, the work adjustment of those in service operations will often hinge upon a capacity to seize and hold the initiative in the service relation.

(Goffman 1990:22)

I do not know how long Josie has worked as a hairdresser, how long she has been at that particular salon, whether she is the owner of the business or not, but she appeared to be very experienced – my rapid haircut, delivered in a highly emotional state, was a good one. Her experience suggests, then, that she would be aware of first impressions and business imperatives, as well as her image in the mirror, yet she continued with her dramatic performance, maybe for my entertainment but maybe also for hers. Maybe she thought if she entertained me I

would recommend her to other students. Maybe she was bored by her job and this helped to make the day more interesting. Maybe the mirror was instrumental in Josie being so dramatic if she enjoyed watching her own performance. However, Josie was also aware of my professional role, that of anthropologist and neophyte academic. Maybe Josie felt that I wanted to talk about different cultures; in a survey undertaken by Rachel Cohen (2010) she notes that two thirds of hairdressers identified relations with customers to be the best part of their job. However, I believe it is pertinent that Josie asked if I would be a doctor and was I writing a book. Maybe, in that moment, she *wanted* me to write about ‘this mad hairdresser’, to justify her stance as an indignant protector of the weak in the face of a potential cultural apologist, and thus her performance was theatrical as a demand to be recorded. Or is that my justification for this chapter? Is Josie performative with other customers?

### ***Performance as Situated Behaviour***

A few months after my encounter with Josie, my partner visited me in Belfast and needed a haircut too: I sent her to Josie. My partner has an Australian accent and she told me that one of Josie’s first questions was to ask where she was from. When she said that she lived in London, Josie launched into a story about when she visited a London theatre (‘London’ being the trigger word on this occasion) to see the musical *Blood Brothers*, about the adult lives of twins separated at birth. My partner recounted the story to me. As the musical progressed one of the brothers dies but, during a quiet and serious scene, the other brother dies unexpectedly... at which point Josie stood up and exclaimed loudly, ‘Oh, that’s terrible! I wasn’t expecting that. One yes, but not two!’ She was in the front row of the dress circle and her interjection drew stares from the audience. Her story had an amusing dénouement. As she was leaving the theatre, a staff member approached her, identifying her as the woman who had called out and he asked her to follow him. Josie thought she was in trouble. But she was taken backstage and introduced to the actors, who were thrilled that their performance had been so believable.

This was a good story to share but it also gestures towards Josie’s sense of self – and her authentication as an actor. A London West End theatre is usually

regarded as an overt performance space for the actors only. The audience role is confined to passive watching and appreciative applauding, based on the notion that actors and audience *pretend* that the story acted out on stage is 'real' but both *know* that it is make-believe (Schieffelin 1998). But Josie breached this theatre etiquette, breached the fourth wall, because she was so engaged with the play. I do not know whether she was aware of the expectations not to interrupt the performance, but if she was, her emotional connection to the play excused her rudeness. She became a 'truth-sayer', calling out about the injustice of unexpected death, and the actors rewarded *her* performance. It also recalls Turner's idea that social life 'even its apparently quietest moments, is characteristically "pregnant" with social dramas' (1982:11). Dramas that are prompted by infractions from the norm or the rules of morality (Turner 1982), such as, for Josie, child abuse masquerading as cultural right, unjust early death or calling out during a theatre performance. Richard Bauman states that performance is situated behaviour, since it is 'situated within and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts' (R.Bauman 1975:298; see also Pink 2012). Having had her performance in a West End theatre applauded by the actors, the hairdressing salon now becomes Josie's personal performance space and in her one-woman salon-show she can be a truth-sayer about the injustice of child-brides because she is the playwright, director and actor, and has a captive audience in the customer and herself. She can turn a social drama (her discovery of the child brides and concern about immigrants) into a stage performance (Turner 1982).

But if I expand the horizon beyond Josie's salon and out into the city, maybe her performance takes on a different hue. Although I have argued above that local life – in this case a visit to a hairdresser – can be viewed as theatre, I also argue that theatricality is a particular feature of public life in Belfast. In Mumford's classic description, the city is a theatre for social action that 'fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater' (2000:94). Belfast is a city where dramatic performance abounds in public life (Buckley and Kenney 1995) – in practices, in rhetoric, and in the fabric of the city where 'the contestation of public space is particularly dramatic' (Hocking 2015:22). The most obvious drama is in the city's Troubled history and this has since become a tourist attraction (Skinner 2016; Nagle



2012). But even in daily life now, in the post-conflict city, there are numerous 'performances'. For example, parades are ubiquitous in Northern Ireland: 3,302 took place during 2014, my fieldwork year, (Parades Commission 2014) and many are carnivalesque, including protest marches, with flute, pipe and drum bands being a major feature (Jarman 1997). These can have a visceral effect on those watching the parade, for example, the beating of the drums and the excitement of the spectacle. But they can also be negatively emotive too, flashpoints for violence and aggression: such as the long-standing dispute in Ardoyne in North Belfast, where the Protestant Orange Order asserts its right to march through Catholic areas, and loyalist groups set up what appeared to be a permanent protest camp at Twadell Avenue, the interface between Catholic and Protestant streets. Although this parade passed off relatively peacefully in the summer of 2016, there were still angry exchanges before the two-year-long protest camp was eventually dismantled (BBC 2016; Belfast Telegraph 2016b).

The abundance of murals, especially in working class areas, is a particular feature in Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland. They are huge, often covering the entire gable-end walls of houses and they are frequently grouped together. Their primary function is to mark territory (Jarman 1997) and, for those with an overt paramilitary message, to intimidate. These threats continue even now: a programme to replace many of the militaristic murals requires years of community negotiation, with the first one taking over ten years to replace, and with one loyalist remarking 'they won't all come down, that is a nailed-on certainty' (quoted in Rolston 2012:543). Flags as big as bedsheets saturate parts of the city, particularly through the summer, and bonfires of pallets rise up to over fifty feet in height before being lit on the eleventh of July to celebrate the 1690 Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne, or on the ninth of August as Catholic nationalists (predominantly dissident republicans) remember the introduction of internment – imprisonment without trial (Jarman 1997; Wilson and Stapleton 2005). This is a city of spectacle.

As I argued in my Introduction, these grand narratives of conflict past and present dominate public life in Belfast. Amongst all this 'official' performance of religion, politics and Troubles, maybe one way for Josie to have her ordinary and everyday stories heard is to dramatize them. She is a smart woman in what may well

be a boring job and her salon is competing with others for custom. She is memorable because she is so engaging and entertaining and unexpectedly transgresses unspoken expectations, such as not chatting to a client about holidays or speaking directly to the actors during a play in a London theatre. When I gave a paper about Josie at the Royal Anthropological Institute (discussed in more detail later in the chapter) one audience member, whom I interviewed several months afterwards, told me that throughout the performance and paper she expected we were going to end up on the Falls Road but that never happened. I suggest, therefore, that Josie may perform her stories to *compete* with the performative grand narratives of public discourse. If, as Jackson states, 'stories are a kind of theatre where we collaborate in reinventing ourselves and authorising notions, both individual and collective, of who we are' (2006:16), then Josie is asserting that what is important for her are local issues of immigration and global issues of child-marriage: her small 't' troubles, not Belfast's Troubled or post-conflict travails.

The chapter thus far has focused primarily on Josie but this was an emotional encounter for me too. I was startled by Josie's unexpected performance, recalling Wulff's (2001) observations on audience reaction to a contemporary and challenging ballet performed by the Royal Ballet Company in Covent Garden. The audience at Covent Garden was more used to familiar, classical performances. I was used to familiar and unchallenging hairdressers whose only performance was a skilful execution of their craft. The next section, then, will take a reflexive, sensory approach to analysis and begin with 'the Josie encounter' written in a different style.

## A Sensational Experience (And A Haircut)

I went in for a haircut.

Half an hour later I emerged

feeling

emotionally battered

and doused in sensations.

Josie (the hairdresser) did not follow the

Expected Script

(questions about holidays, a stack of celebrity magazines to read)

but instead

**p**

**l**

**u**

**n**

**g**

**e**

**d**

us into a Dramatic! Emotional! Embodied! performance

played out in front of a **large mirror** where she and I were both

actors

and

audience.

She shared her views

on immigration, on child abuse, on street-beggars,

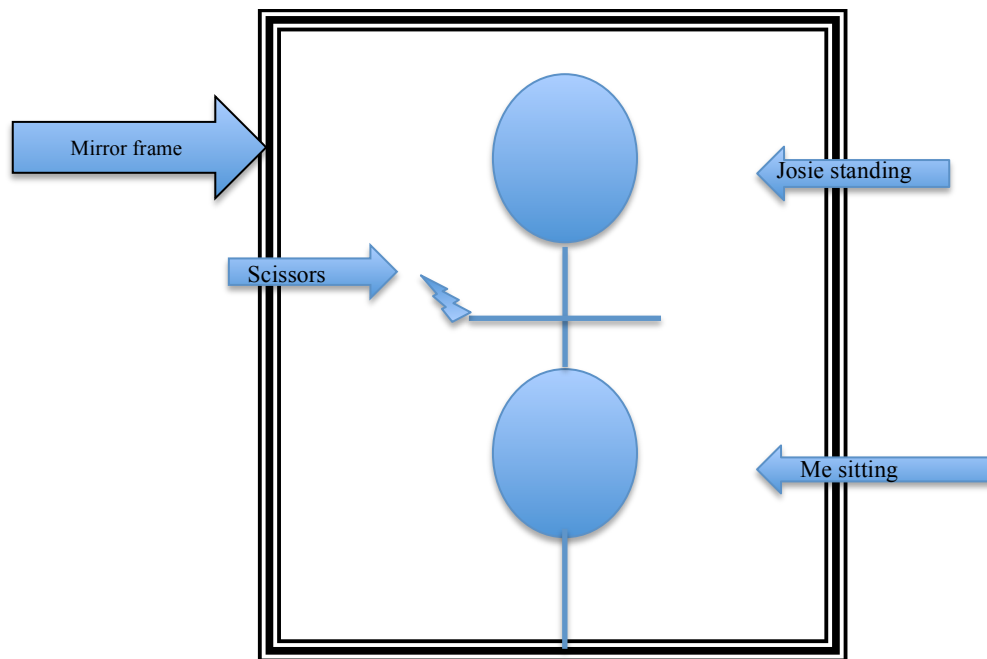
and I came out of the salon confused and exhilarated and angry and guilty and I

Instinctively Knew I had learnt something through my body even though I was

Not Quite Sure What That Was.

I had shorter hair.

But that seemed like a by-product.



**Figure 27 Schematic Diagram: Josie, the Mirror and Me**

### ***Sensory Ethnography***

The hairdressing appointment was an emotional encounter for Josie – and for me too, although for different reasons. Josie was upset about the social worker’s story and the Romanians, while I was unexpectedly thrown into a situation in which I did not agree with all that Josie said and I had to make some instant decisions on how to react. During the half-hour haircut I *instinctively knew* that this was an important encounter for my research, although I was not able at the time to understand why: in-the-moment sensory overload trumped cognitive understanding. But temporal, geographic and sensory distance from the hairdressing appointment has opened up a space for cognitive analysis. Sarah Pink urges ethnographers of the senses:

[To] be more explicit about the ways of experiencing and knowing that become central to their ethnographies, to share with others the senses of place they felt as they sought to occupy similar places to those of their research participants, and to acknowledge the processes through which their sensory knowing has become academic knowledge.

(Pink 2009:2)

I am less concerned here with a sense of place, as that is addressed explicitly in Chapters Two and Four. However, I will explore the sensory knowledge I gained with Josie and consider to what extent I can use this knowledge to understand why she may have performed in this way.

In the salon, in the moment, my senses and emotions were bombarded – and I choose that verb knowingly. I heard the sounds of Josie’s words, the quickly-snipping scissors, the tinkling doorbell and the pinging timer on the dryer. I saw a visual extravaganza of Josie’s body and particularly her face pulling some extraordinary expressions, most of which were witnessed through the mirror where I could also see an unflattering portrait of myself. I felt drips of water running down my neck and the soft, satin-y touch of the gown where it touched my hands clasped beneath it. I must have smelt the chemicals in the salon too, although I cannot remember them. I was anxious to remember everything, guilty that I did not challenge some of her statements, fascinated and excited by what was unfolding before me, and worried about what my hair would look like at the end of it all. Josie’s emotions were expressed through her body and words, but my heightened emotional state was kept under wraps as I tried to focus on what was happening and my role in the engagement – what Hochschild (2003) refers to as emotive dissonance. But, importantly, all this was *happening simultaneously*, producing a jarring effect on me. I felt as though I was sprinting to catch up while sitting absolutely still. As Alma Gottlieb identifies:

[T]he anthropological field encounter can (...) be described as an emotional cauldron (...) it does not make intellectual sense to divorce affective considerations from our analyses when they are a key component of the experiences that formed the bedrock of our understanding.

(Gottlieb 2016:101)

Likewise Paul Stoller believes that ‘sensuous scholarship’ requires anthropologists to ‘tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as

disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument' (1997:xv). Therefore, let me tack back, briefly, to the moment when I left the hairdressers...

### ***What Happened Next***

Walking down the street away from the salon, I feel as though I've been hit over the head with a baseball bat. I'm walking quickly but I don't know where I'm going. I'm angry and upset and exhilarated and anxious. I feel consumed by these emotions and I feel, I don't know... jittery. I need to externalize my discomfort so I use the voice recorder on my phone to blurt out an inchoate jumble of words and phrases but after a few minutes even they fail me and I just go 'aaaarrrrggggghhhhh'. I'm shocked that some racist statements were shared so readily with me, but I'm absolutely fascinated by Josie's theatrical performance and how she used her body. And I'm thrilled that I've had my first 'ethnographic moment', because the last half hour feels as though it's been very significant, 'proper fieldwork', although I'm not sure how or why. But I feel really uncomfortable too about my role in the performance. Why didn't I challenge her views? Was it OK to observe her through the mirror or over the top of my book when she was with the Chinese customer? If I'm going to be a 'proper' anthropologist (whatever that means) then I need to be a bit more objective, record what I've just seen and heard, so I head off to the nearest café to type up some fieldnotes. All through the evening I'm thinking about it – what does this all mean? – and I write some tentative thoughts in my journal.

### ***Coming to My Senses***

Why was my meeting with Josie so powerful for me? Of all the experiences I had in the field, of all the people I met and the interesting discoveries I made, Josie is the one I keep coming back to as I write up my dissertation. It is not just that she was expressing sentiments I did not agree with: in order to understand the world from another's point of view, we need to set our own judgements aside. I had done that before (and since) in the field without the reaction I had to Josie. Gottlieb states that we 'live our lives at least as much in our feelings as we do in our thoughts' (2016:101), so maybe the clue is in the heightened emotional and sensory nature of this hairdressing appointment. Although managing feelings is an art that we learn for many social situations, in certain occupations '*the emotional style of the service they*

*offer is part of the service itself* (Hochschild 2003:5, original emphasis). Hochschild refers to this as 'emotional labour'. When there is dissonance between personal feelings and those on display it leads to an emotional cost for the worker. For example, air cabin crew are expected to smile throughout their long working day and to remain calm when dealing with angry passengers, even if they are tired or sad or if the passengers' anger upsets them. Hairdressers have been widely analysed using Hochschild's concepts of emotional labour (Gimlin 1996; Barber 2008; Cohen 2010; Hill and Bradley 2010; Huppertz 2012), but Josie did not keep her feelings in check, and her performance enabled her to *express*, not suppress, her feelings. However, the emotional labour for me was very high: I chose not to share my feelings and I was hyper-alert to my surroundings in order to commit to memory, as accurately as I could, what was happening. This could explain why I felt bombarded by sensory stimuli. In the rest of my fieldwork I was never in such another 'dramatic' situation.

Pink notes that sensory ethnography should 'acknowledge sensory experience *and* knowing' (2009:120, my emphasis) and that, as ethnographers, we should be clear about how we intend to approach our analysis. In his work exploring the art and skill of *capoeira*, a dance-like martial art, Downey asks 'how does the body come to "know"' (2007:223) and he explores this knowing through skill-acquisition during apprenticeships (*cf* Marchand 2007; Ingold 2000). During the hairdressing appointment I instinctively knew I was learning something important, but in asking myself just what it was that my body 'knew', I struggled initially to see a connection with these anthropological studies, since I was not apprenticed to be a hairdresser and my quest for knowledge was focused on what I could learn about Josie. However, I came to the realisation (whilst writing) that I was apprenticed as an anthropologist, thus my analysis in this section takes a reflexive turn, to the self-knowledge I gained as a fieldworker.

The first lesson for me was that in the field one is always on fieldwork. An obvious statement and one I was aware of intellectually before I went to Belfast; I recall in particular anthropologist Kit Davis saying 'there's never nothing happening'.<sup>42</sup> But it was not until this was reinforced *bodily* that I understood what it

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<sup>42</sup> Scottish Training in Anthropological Research Meeting, 22-25 April 2013.

meant in practice. I went into the hairdressers for a haircut and expected to spend my time reading whatever book I had taken in with me. I expected Josie to follow the ritual I had become accustomed to on a first appointment as a customer-stranger, such as conversation about holidays and last night's television, then the offer, politely declined, of celebrity magazines to read (see Cardoso 2012). But instead I was thrust into a situation that I felt was important for my research, not because Josie was willingly offering her personal views to me but because of the dramatic and emotional nature of this offer. I was unprepared for the onslaught of sensory and emotional stimuli and had to readjust my performed role quickly from customer to researcher, what Jackson (2010) refers to as fieldwork boundary-disruption.

This lesson in bodily experience recalls Paul Stoller who, as a young anthropologist, was apprenticed to a sorcerer in Niger. Stoller became both skilled and knowledgeable during his apprenticeship but it was not until he was diagnosed and treated for cancer, many years later, that he experienced a *bodily* understanding of sorcery, enabling him to draw deeper meaning from his earlier experiences (Stoller 2007a). Renato Rosaldo (1984) also wrote about this kind of bodily understanding: it was not until his wife died, some fourteen years into their long-term fieldwork among Ilongot headhunters in the Phillipines, that he understood, through his own lived experience, the headhunters' description of the rage of grief. Some of the sorcery rituals that Stoller learnt helped him to maintain a semblance of control over the stress, bodily disruption and emotional isolation of his illness. This link between ritual and control had a resonance for me too. Part of the ritual behaviour in the hairdressers is for the customer to be dressed in special clothing by the expert – the gown that is put on you by the hairdresser, a somewhat infantilising procedure (Eayrs 1993), the costume that signifies the role of customer. And the customer gives up a certain amount of control by virtue of the power of the hairdresser to change one's appearance. Power relations are reinforced by the relative body positions of the hairdresser standing and the customer sitting. But with Josie, my sense of control was further diminished by the unexpectedness of her actions, the rapidity with which the narrative was delivered, the sound of the scissors snipping and my anxiety about the final haircut.



There was probably an element of emotional contagion too, where the emotions of one person prompt (not necessarily the same) emotions in another (Hatfield et al. 1994; Barsade 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). Josie's anxiety about the Indian girls and the Romanians, so dramatically performed, fed into my anxieties about my researcher role and my responses. This recalls Chekhov's (2002) point, made earlier, about a convincing performance relying on reciprocal action. In the hairdressers, particularly for the first fifteen minutes or so, the sensory stimuli and my emotional reactions will have resulted in a surge of adrenaline in my body, the 'fight and flight' hormone that speeds up the heart rate and increases blood flow to the brain and to the major muscles in the limbs. Josie too would have had an adrenaline rush, prompted by her emotional memories (LaBar and Cabeza 2006; see also Turner 1982), but she could respond with an embodied retelling of the social worker's story, rapid speech, vigorous hair washing, wild gesturing, emotional statements etc. However I could neither fight nor fly, since I chose not to challenge her views and I had to sit very still so she could cut my hair. I was particularly worried in the moment that I would not remember everything that happened, but the physiological effect of rapid heart beat, blood to brain etc., which had no physical outlet for me, made me hyper-aware of my surroundings and fuelled my emotional turmoil.

Another insight into myself as fieldworker concerns my earlier comment about this ethnographic moment being 'proper anthropology'. I had been in Belfast for about two months when I met with Josie; settling in, getting to know my neighbours, walking the dog, meeting lots of strangers. I had thousands of words of fieldnotes but it was difficult to discern if any of it was useful or interesting. However, in this particular half hour in the hairdressers I felt totally immersed in the field – emotionally, sensually and cognitively. But why was it any more 'proper' than everything else I was involved in? Had I unwittingly internalised the hierarchy of fieldwork that still predominates in parts of the academy where 'comprehensive immersion' in the exotic field far away living among the radically 'other' is somehow deemed to be more authentic (Amit 2000:5)? My experience with Josie was sufficiently different for me to categorize it as 'proper' fieldwork, explaining my constant returning to 'the Josie moment'.

Wulff (2000) identifies how an emotional disagreement with a ballet director helped to deepen her relationship with him to the extent that he became a key participant in her research. Maybe I was so sensually and emotionally engaged during my half-hour with Josie, and conscious of this engagement at the time, that I was *experiencing* fieldwork, such that human experience, not physical location or exotic othering becomes proper anthropology (Davies 2010). However, the mirror forced me into seeing myself as a co-actor, witnessing not only Josie's performance as a hairdresser but my own as a customer *and as an anthropologist*. Josie, the mirror and me may have felt like proper anthropology, but in my emotional turmoil I did not feel like a proper anthropologist. Wilson and Donnan comment on the Janus-like quality of participant observation, where the anthropologist seeks to 'observe, record, relate and participate' (2006:8); my two faces were those of customer and anthropologist, which felt at that time to be in conflict, and those two faces looked outward onto the scene, where I was acting and reacting, and inward to my mind as I questioned those actions. Ben Spatz asks what kind of knowledge is held and transferred by actors and dancers, noting that:

*Supposedly people join theatre and dance companies to perform in front of paying audiences, but practitioners know that this is an inadequate explanation of the phenomena (...) What kind of recognition takes place when a particular area of technique strikes us to the core?*

(2015:6 original emphasis)

When I think about this sentence, it helps me to articulate that, despite analysing Josie's embodied performance in the hairdressers and my embodied sensory responses, it still feels an inadequate explanation for something that struck me to the core. Rapport and Overing note that:

[The] body cannot know something other with anything approaching the fullness, the immediacy and inescapability that it can know itself – and no other can know it in the same way.

(2007:38-39)

But if my body can only know itself, can mimesis help me to understand Josie? Hamera notes that 'performance' reminds 'ethnography' that 'embodiment and the politics of positionality are as central to representing the fieldwork encounter as they are to participating in it' (2011:320). Maybe acting as Josie would bring me closer to the knowledge she held in her body when the social worker's story struck her to the core. For Kay Milton, emotions are part of a 'general learning capacity that enables us to learn from any particular part of our environment' (2007:67). So, if I recreate a sensory experience, just as an actor could, and displace it into a different environment, maybe I could use my body to disseminate some of my bodily knowing and, through sharing, deepen my learning. I thus turn to another type of performance and begin with another written account of the hairdressing experience.

### **Performing Josie: Re-Creating An Ethnographic Moment**

#### **ACT ONE. SCENE ONE. HAIR SALON.**

DIRECTOR: [off stage]: And lights up...

*[Lights up to reveal a woman sitting with her head tipped backwards over a sink. Josie stands behind, washing The Customer's hair. They are alone.]*

JOSIE: [*Belfast accent*] A student? What're you studying then?

CUSTOMER: [*English accent*] Anthropology.

JOSIE: What's that then? Studying Indians like?

CUSTOMER: Studying different cultures so you can understand them.

JOSIE: [*Shocked expression*] Oh, I would find that very difficult! What about them Indians that marry their girls off at eight years of age? It's not right! It's child abuse.

*[Josie washes The Customer's hair vigorously. She speaks quickly, asking questions but not waiting for answers.]*

JOSIE: It's legal in their country to marry at eight and we have to accept it. Shouldn't be allowed. I've got a client who told me about it. A social worker in London.

Couldn't stand it. Quit her job. Told her bosses it wasn't right. Giving girls away at

eight years of age! Eight years of age I tell you!! TO OLD MEN!!! That's rape, so it is. It's wrong. We shouldn't let them in.

*[Josie towels the customer's hair and leads her to sit downstage.]*

JOSIE: Come on over to the mirror here.

*[Josie indicates where the mirror is so the audience know they are seeing the 'mirror view'. Josie delivers the monologue to The Customer via the mirror. She is either cutting hair quickly, gesticulating wildly, or has her hands poised motionless above The Customer's head, scissors and comb always in her hands. Her gestures and facial expressions are very expressive]*

JOSIE: Yes, child abuse! In Wimbledon!! Can you imagine? I thought it was all strawberries and cream but The Social Worker says you'd be surprised what happens in Wimbledon. One child had a rash on her wee bottom. Know what it was? Beard rash!!! The parents are selling their children. What sort of people would do that? Social Worker said "did you see that advert on the telly, the one asking for money to keep children in education?" Well, I did but I didn't think anything about it. Anyway. The Social Worker says that's what they want the money for, to stop these children being sold as wives. I saw that advert in a whole different light then. But if they want money they need to make it clear about these horrible marriages. If I was making the advert I'd have the child looking wistfully back at its parents.

*[Pause as Josie looks wistfully over her shoulder... then back to the mirror]*

JOSIE: That'd get the money in. But talking to this Social Worker and seeing this advert has really upset me. It was weeks ago and I'm still upset about it. Obsessed with it. It's made me look at the whole Indian community differently. I've been going round looking at all the foreign children really closely in the prams to see if they've been abused! Mothers clutching the pram, frightened.

*[As she is speaking Josie mimes looking into a pram and the mother clutching onto the side]*

JOSIE: They probably think I'm some kind of space cadet!! They probably think 'What's this blonde white woman want with my child?' they probably think I want to steal their child, what with me being blonde and all. It's not real blonde of course, chemical highlights, but they don't know that.

*[Customer nods]*

JOSIE: And what about them Romanians? They just keep coming out of the house! There's rules isn't there about that kind of thing? How many bedrooms, how many bathrooms, that sort of thing. Well it doesn't seem to stop 'em. There's eighteen of them get picked up by a bus every day outside here. Three of them beg on the street. Well, I says to Pauline...

*[Josie flicks her head backwards towards the other, empty, hairdressing station]*

JOSIE: ... Pauline, I says, they don't look very skinny to me. They laugh and open their mouths wide and they're full of gold fillings.

*[Josie opens her mouth wide and stands still for several seconds. She has no gold fillings. Lights fade].*

This is the opening of the first act of a three-act play (approximately ten minutes duration) written and performed by me for an audience at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in London. In the remainder of Act I, Josie continues to expound her views on Romanians and the lights go down just after new customers enter the salon. Act II has stage directions but no dialogue and all the action is mimed: The Customer watches through the mirror as Josie interacts with the new clients and cuts a man's hair. In Act III, Josie returns to The Customer to finish her hair and to ask if she will be a doctor, commenting that she will be writing about this mad hairdresser now. The only props used are a towel around The Customer's shoulders and a pair of scissors, which snip furiously.

I was scheduled to give a full length paper (one and a half hours) at the RAI 'Research in Progress' seminar and the small audience of about fifteen people, some of whom I had met before, were a mixture of PhD candidates, early career researchers and one professor. The abstract for 'Half an Hour in Belfast: theatricality (and a haircut) in the ethnographic present' (Lane 2015b) was circulated in advance but I did not indicate there would be a performance: only the seminar facilitator knew beforehand. Thus I began, without explanation, with the play.

It was an amateurish performance. I played 'Josie', another person acted as me (The Customer), and a third (as 'Prompt') read out stage directions from the script. I forgot some of my lines and had to improvise a little but fortunately my

fellow 'actors' stayed in role and extemporised as necessary. I was anxious about performing, particularly as I needed to exaggerate my movements and facial expressions, just as Josie had, and to utter sentiments that were uncomfortable. I knew there were some comedic moments, just as there had been with Josie, but would I have the skill to pull them off? As I indicated to the audience afterwards, I had not acted since I was ten years old and even then I was only Third Villager, non-speaking part. But, most of all, this needed to be a truthful representation of the 'ethnographic present' and the paper that followed needed substance as well as style. As it turned out, my anxieties were unfounded. Both performance and paper were well received, the debate was lively and informative, and we continued with our discussions afterwards over several glasses of wine.

My intention with the performance was twofold. First, I wanted to put the audience at some dis-ease, to plunge them into a dramatic performance where they did not know what was happening or why, in an attempt to convey my confusion and sensory overload during the original hairdressing appointment. Although this was a paper of fieldwork past, giving the paper was, for me, fieldwork present and the audience's comments and reaction, along with an interview carried out several months afterwards, contributed to my analysis. Second, I wanted to give as accurate a portrayal as I could of the 'ethnographic moment', and to set up a theatrical trope as an analytic tool. Writing about this performance prompts a third consideration: just what is the nature of the knowledge I gained through the performance?

As a mode to disseminate my fieldwork the performance was successful, as the audience's senses and emotions were more explicitly engaged than they would be with a traditional paper and they were engaged on several levels. For example, they had to deal with the unexpected (a performance); with a transposition of roles (ethnographer playing research subject) and with uncertainty (as this transposition was not stated at the outset); some audience members felt uncomfortable about me performing (an initial concern that I was making fun of a research subject) while others felt uncomfortable with themselves (laughing at some of the 'politically incorrect' things Josie said that were not in accord with their own views); it was visually and aurally engaging (wild gesticulations, the sound of snipping scissors); and maybe there was some anxiety too (would I inadvertently cut my fellow actor's

hair?). Even the amateurishness of my performance underlined the difficulty in recreating 'an ethnographic moment', something that all the audience members, as anthropologists, were able to empathise with.

Only my body can know what I experienced in the hairdressers but I was able to stimulate some sensory and emotional responses in the audience that mimicked this experience. One audience member referred to this heightened engagement as, 'you come for a talking-head seminar, sit back, receive, [but] listening is much more interactive in a performance like that, because of the immediacy of the bodies'. The audience may not have had the adrenaline rush I had in the hairdressers, but their adrenaline levels were probably higher than if I had just delivered my paper; they had more oxygen delivered to their brains making it easier to engage in the proceedings and they were interested enough in my fieldwork to ask helpful and challenging questions and to give me useful feedback.

What I could not recreate in my performance was the effect of the mirror. Although 'Josie' indicated to the audience where the mirror would be, tracing the outline so they were (to a certain extent) seeing the 'mirror view' on stage, the fourth wall was maintained, not breached: the audience could not see themselves and their own reactions and performance; 'Josie' was speaking *to* 'The Customer' and *at* the audience. An explanation in the paper was required to analyse the mirror, recalling Stoller's earlier point about the need to tack between sensory and cognitive understanding.

A more elaborate and professional staging of the performance may have been able to achieve the mirror's trick through theatrical devices. For example, two articles about Andrew Irving's fieldwork in Uganda with people with AIDS (2007; 2011) were turned into a play *The Man Who Almost Killed Himself*, directed by Josh Azouz, which premiered in a theatre at the 2014 Edinburgh Festival. In the play, the protagonist Daniel Kafeero had been recently diagnosed with AIDS and, feeling he no longer had a place in the world, decided to take his own life. He tried several different ways, such as hanging, trying to jump off a high building, pouring petrol over himself. But each one was unsuccessful, for example, he inadvertently purchased diesel instead of petrol and could not light it with a match. In the play, the theatre company uses an array of theatrical devices such as trapdoors, moving

scenery, changes of costume, musicians etc. to convey Daniel's story and his distress.<sup>43</sup> But these theatrical tools (or theatrical know-how) were not available to me. My primary goal was performance as fieldwork and a tool for analysis, not performance to disseminate to a wider, non-academic audience.

Irving engaged with his ethnographic data by collaborating with others in three different ways: in the field with Daniel he 'staged' a reconstruction of Daniel's walk and suicide attempts; writing up the data he was 'performing' for journal editors as he complied with academic written conventions; and finally he collaborated with the director, script-writer and a cast of professional actors for the festival performance (personal communication: conversation with A. Irving, 10 February 2017). There are some parallels here with my encounter with Josie: my field experience, writing this chapter, and my performance at the RAI. These different ways to engage with data lead to different interpretations and enable different kinds of knowing. So what kind of knowing did my performance lead to?

### ***Performance as a way of knowing***

Performance ethnography offers the researcher a vocabulary for exploring the expressive elements of culture, a focus on embodiment as a crucial component of cultural analysis and a tool for representing scholarly engagement, and a critical, interventionist commitment to theory in/as practice.

(Hamera 2011:318)

Victor Turner understood performance as a 'dialectic of "flow"'; meanings are seen 'in action' and these actions 'shape and explain behaviour' (quoted in Schechner and Appel 1990:1). In other words, we can come to know one another better by entering into each other's performances. My performance of the 'ethnographic moment' with Josie was not as immersive as Turner's anthropology-drama

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<sup>43</sup> Premiered at the Edinburgh Festival 7-11 August 2014. Also simultaneously screened on UK national television BBC Arts 10 August 2014 and through the Odeon cinema network 11 August 2014. (Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology n.d.).



workshops, where he asks students to script and act out experiences from his fieldwork (Turner 1988). I am not an accomplished actor and I was too nervous to ask an audience member to act as me (my partner carried out this function). This was an opportunity lost to interrogate someone else's reactions to being plunged unexpectedly into a drama and to see if this gave them different insights than merely being in the audience (Turner 1988). Nevertheless, my colleagues were generous in their suggestions and interpretations, many of which have made their way into this analysis. My performance was successful with regard to academic dissemination and discussion but did *my* bodily re-enactment give me a greater insight into *Josie's* bodily performance? Downey suggests that:

Learning a perceptual practice means living, perceiving and coming to know *through* it. That is, if one learns to look in a specific way, the world will appear differently than it might through another style of seeing.

(Downey 2007:228, original emphasis)

I am not sure that I did find another way of seeing Josie. Of course, Downey is referring to a lengthy period of apprenticeship to learn *capoeira*, not an amateurish, nerve-ridden performance based on a half-hour hairdressing appointment.

And yet I did learn something.

Sarah Pink believes that 'analysis does not just happen in our heads, but involves all our corporeality' (2009:120). Although performance ethnography can reveal how emotions and behaviour are interrelated to produce meaning (Hamera 2011), my emotional and corporeal knowledge was a reflection on myself rather than on Josie per se. In my bodily movements and verbosity I was self-consciously me acting as someone else, self-conscious about the RAI setting and the anthropologically-knowledgeable audience. Without discussing the hairdressing appointment *with* Josie I can only impose my etic analysis and, from the perspective of understanding bodily knowledge, even that is lacking. As Toren notes we cannot 'have access to how we came to know what we know' (Toren 1999:13; quoted in Harris 2007:17). Whilst *writing* about a bodily experience in the hairdressers, over two years after it happened, or a bodily experience at the RAI one year later, I rely

on cognitive memories to produce linear sentences. However, in response to Toren, Harris suggests that even if we cannot re-experience, we can attempt, in good faith, 'to recreate the learning' (Harris 2007:17). That is what I attempted to do with my performance. Analysing our own emotions in the field will, according to James Davies, 'more assist than impede our understanding of the lifeworlds in which we set ourselves down' (2010:1). Meanwhile Tonkin (2006) believes that our emotions are not only constitutive of our fieldwork but in our writing up too. Reflecting on my emotional responses in the hairdressers and at the RAI helped me to reflect on Josie's emotional response to the social worker's story as she dramatically retold it to me, but it is to an account of my writing that I now turn.

### **Experiments With Style**

One of the reasons I chose to perform at the RAI seminar rose out of my dissatisfaction with attempts to represent this ethnographic moment in writing. In this chapter I have presented the vignette about Josie in three different ways. To what extent have they conveyed what I want to the reader? Ultimately that is for the reader to decide, but my view is that the opening vignette at the beginning of the chapter used description, dialogue and the present tense in an attempt to render the theatrical nature of my meeting with Josie. Although I wanted the main focus to be on her, my presence in the writing is on two levels: as the first-person narrator who is a character in the story but also, in the asides in parentheses, as an anthropologist-in-a-dilemma who has her own interior monologue, which is shared with the audience (reader) but not with the other actor (Josie). There needed to be enough description in this writing to 'place' the reader in the salon as a set up for the theatrical analysis that followed, but my self-imposed word limit for the vignette, alongside my desire to focus on spectacle, meant that the piece did not really do justice to the emotional and sensory aspects that the encounter had for me.

The second vignette was a writing experiment that I did to help me think about the sensory aspects of my encounter with Josie prior to a presentation at an Association of Social Anthropologists conference (Lane 2016). I played around with jarring sentences, differences in font, and the possibly pretentious placing of words

on paper such that blank spaces become part of the 'text', to see whether this conveyed something of what I felt. It was partially successful. When I presented it to a group of PhD colleagues in a writing-up seminar, they concurred that the jarring effect gave some sense of discombobulation but it still required a lengthy explanation from me to accompany the writing. I was not able fully to depict the sensory and *embodied* aspects with words alone, but this could be a lack of writing skill on my part.

Writing the vignette as a play brought the focus back to Josie and seemed to give a sense of conversational immediacy while the minimal stage directions may have engaged the reader's imagination. But play scripts are primarily a tool for actors to act and directors to direct, not literary works for an audience to read. Thus, as a piece of writing it is the least useful.

Of course, it is not possible to recreate an exact fieldwork experience. As Edward Bruner notes: 'Every ethnographer is painfully aware of the discrepancy between the richness of the lived field experience and the paucity of language used to characterize it' (Bruner 1984:6). Each piece of creative writing relied on my fallible memory and demanded its own literary devices, such as dialogue mixed with description, words as pictures, stage directions etc. This means that none of them is a verbatim record of what took place. For example, I am not exactly sure at what point Josie asked how much I wanted cutting off my fringe. What I do remember is that it was jarringly juxtaposed with a dramatic story. So can any of them claim authenticity?

This recalls Lauren Richardson's work to depict the life story of a research participant as a poem, in part to challenge what she saw as 'the deep, unchallenged constructedness of sociological truth claims' (Richardson 1993:697). When she recited the poem at a seminar for fellow academics, she inadvertently skipped a line. Richardson felt this did not render the account any less truthful but her academic audience, who were forewarned of what to expect (the poem was circulated in advance), were less generous than my audience at the RAI, and some of them rigorously questioned the authenticity of Richardson's poetic account. Interestingly, she turned this experience into fieldwork, which she subsequently wrote up as a play – she felt that to render the account in prose would not convey the experience

adequately enough. My *performance* of Josie, even in its amateurishness, felt like a more truthful depiction of the hairdressing experience than anything I had written, because it involved my body and emotions as well as my words. As it was accompanied by an explanatory paper I could expand on the description and analysis. I could, in Stoller's words, tack between 'the analytical and the sensible' (Stoller 1997:xv).

## Conclusion

As I have reiterated several times in this chapter, this particular half-hour in Belfast had a profound effect on me. It was the first time I felt 'alive' in the field, the first time I felt 'displaced' there. Although it was only two months into my fieldwork, I had lived and studied in Belfast seven years earlier so there was an element of familiarity to my fieldsite. Nevertheless, this familiarity was ruptured when I went to Josie for my haircut, and her performance of the social worker's story and her views on Romanian immigrants was theatrically told. On returning from the field, Josie was the first piece of ethnography I wrote up and I have returned to her in several ways, not just through chapter revisions and experiments with writing style, but also a conference presentation and the RAI seminar. Victor Turner differentiates between 'mere experience' i.e. everyday events that pass by without comment, and 'an experience', which erupts from or disrupts routine behaviour (Turner 1986:36). But my encounter with Josie seemed, somehow, even more significant than that and to fit more closely to Fernandez's definition of a revelatory incident:

[Those] especially charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning (...). It is our task to describe them as accurately as possible and then, placing them in their multiple contexts, to tease out their multiple meanings.

(Fernandez 1986:xi)

I believe that the meeting with the social worker was a revelatory incident for Josie. Until that moment she did not know about the practice of child-brides being

brought from India to England. She had seen the advert on the television raising money to educate young girls in India but it took on more import in the light of this discovery. When I used the trigger words ‘understanding culture’ in the context of anthropological study they tapped into her emotional memories of the meeting with the social worker and the strength of her emotion led her to use an exaggerated, performative style of storytelling to recount this to me. Josie’s concern about child abuse, which trumped any perceived ‘cultural right’, could be said to be a *cosmopolitan* one in a Rapportian sense of the word – where the concern for the individual transcends a deterministic cultural categorization (Rapport 2012a). However, I did not mirror Josie’s concerns and this probably led her into ever more dramatic gestures and her statements about Romanian immigrants.

Meeting Josie was certainly a revelatory moment for me and I have chosen to draw out some of the multiple meanings through a theatrical trope, including a performance, and a sensory analysis. Jackson suggests that we should make ourselves ‘experimental subjects and treat ourselves as primary data’, even though it runs the risk of dissolving the emotional distance between ourselves and the people we seek to understand (1989:4). Being in an emotional state can sediment memories (Milton 2006; Reisberg and Hertel 2004; Lysaght 2006). My emotional shock and fascination with Josie’s performance, and the adrenaline-induced increase in blood to my brain, sedimented this memory for me, explaining why I keep returning to her in my writing and in presentations. Pink’s call for a reflexive ethnography is as a means of ‘apprehending and comprehending other people’s experiences’ (Pink 2009:46). My shock at being plunged into a drama enables me to understand Josie’s shock at the social worker’s story, which embedded and embodied this memory for her, enabling an embodied and emotional retelling to me six weeks later. Meanwhile, my emotional reactions to this retelling ‘played a catalytic role in [my] learning process’ (Monchamp 2007:6).

My naïveté as a fieldworker meant that I did not follow up this particular experience with Josie. Although I went back to her two more times to have my haircut, on the second occasion she did not appear to remember me. She was quiet and un-dramatic in her professional role and she thwarted my expectations yet again, as this time I thought my appointment was a ticket to a performance not just

a contract for a haircut. This further discombobulated me and I was not confident enough to talk to her about our earlier meeting. She may have remembered me and been embarrassed so I chose not to remind her of it. On the third occasion Josie did remember me. I was now a more regular customer and she was much more animated as we exchanged stories about our families. But again, I missed the opportunity to engage her in conversation about the social worker's story. In part this is because it was not until I had left the field that its full import became apparent.

So to what extent can I make assertions about Josie based primarily on a half-hour meeting, when the founding method of anthropological fieldwork is long-term participant observation? This harks back to the discussion in Chapter Two on the nature of city living and of brief connections with strangers. People's presentations of themselves to strangers are on the surface but they are not superficial. Sometimes our lives briefly touch yet they can still make a mark. Josie conveyed her views and beliefs very powerfully through words, prosody, gestures and emotion in a very brief interlude with someone she had never met before and the meeting may have been unimportant for her – another day, another client, another story. The primary knowledge I gained was about the nature of knowledge production itself.

Finally, with regard to multiple contexts and multiple meanings, I fear one chapter has not done justice to Josie. I have analysed this half hour in Belfast using a theatrical trope and, sensually, by using my body as a research tool because these tropes demanded to be addressed: Josie's theatrical performance and the sensory and emotional bombardment I felt were too powerful at the time for me to ignore. But I have half joked to colleagues that my whole thesis could be entitled 'Half an Hour in Belfast': I could have placed this encounter in many more contexts and derived many more meanings (as some of my earlier chapter revisions began to do), and I could have analysed our next two meetings, but I chose instead to focus on my first meeting with her and I chose a theatrical metaphor, as it seemed to be the most fitting – and, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state, our experience of the world, including our experience of formal argument, rests upon our choices of metaphor. I could have worked collaboratively with Josie to access an emic analysis of her performance but I did not follow that up at the time of my fieldwork. I have chosen

to restrain myself to one chapter primarily because I do not want to do a disservice to all the other people who generously gave up their time to help with my research and who provided me with fascinating data. But, as actor Rupert Everett eloquently attests:

It's difficult to describe a theatrical production. It exists for the moment it is on the stage, and even then, it's different for everyone who sees it. As the curtain falls, the final tableau dissolves into the ether. A few pictures might remain to jog the memory, but photographs are performances of their own, and so the magic of theatre is its life, yet also its death. Both are contained and celebrated in the moment of applause. The curtain goes up again. The actors take their bows. It's over.

(Everett 2007:110)

## INTERLUDE

The ethnographic chapters thus far have focused on my engagements with strangers in Belfast and the stories they told me. I have argued that, through these quotidian stories, people have represented an image of life in the city that is non-Troubled. In the next chapter my ethnography takes a different turn, as I consider how life in Belfast is represented in contemporary fiction that takes the city as a central feature: one could say that the city is a character in the novels and short stories that I analyse. In doing so, I will consider to what extent fictional representations of Belfast concur with the stories of everyday life shared by the research participants I worked with.



## Chapter Six

### STEREOTYPICALLY BELFAST?

#### Fictional Representations of the City

[Alan] bought refreshments at the Spar on Bradbury Place. Striding into town, towards the docks, a green-red-and-white carrier bag swinging from his hand, he smiled to himself (...) He passed new cafés, new bars that had opened since he'd left for Oxford. He noticed the customers: affluent, chic, besuited, and he thought to himself, Belfast, at last, is catching up with me. Belfast is getting ready.

(Baker 2002:103)

In Jo Baker's 2002 novel *Offcomer*, Alan returns to his hometown Belfast to apply (successfully) for a lecturer's position at Queen's University, after spending three years in Oxford completing his doctoral degree. Set in the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefires, the story centres around Alan's controlling relationship with his English girlfriend Claire, who leaves Oxford to live with him, and with her attempts to deal with his behaviour, initially by turning her unhappiness inwards and self-harming, but then by taking back some control to leave him and stay with friends in Belfast.

There is very little by way of Belfast's Troubled history in the novel. For example, although in Oxford Alan claims that he is Irish (rather than Northern Irish), ignoring 'the ghost of his Orange grandfather growl[ing] at him', since he believes that romantic myths of Ireland added to the 'glamour of violence' in the north will make him irresistible to women (2002:34-35), these themes are not explored any further. A reader versed in the politics and history of Northern Ireland would recognise the hinted-at unionist ideology in the growling grandfather, but this nuance would escape the uninformed, just as it does Claire. There is only one direct reference to Belfast's sectarian problems, near the end of the novel, when Claire asks why the city is so quiet and is told it is 'Coming up on the Twelfth'. Here again it is a passing reference, as Claire muses that she has no sense of what this means, and

when she hears music from the marching bands wafting in through the window, she merely notes that one of the tunes ‘seemed to want to be the theme from [the television sit-com] *Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em*’ (2002:289), effectively minimising, almost dismissing, the 12th of July. This date is the high point of the loyalist and unionist calendar, where Orangemen and marching bands parade their triumphalist narrative through the city (Bryan 2000), and where, the night before the parades, bonfires are lit to burn Catholic and Irish insignia, and there is often an increase in sectarian tension that can spill into violence (McDowell et al. 2015). It is as though, through Claire’s voice, the author sees these details as faint, background colour-washes that are unimportant to the characters or the plot.

Alan notices a marked change in the city. Belfast, at last, is catching up with him. I shall use this sentiment as a starting point to argue that literary fiction about Belfast is, at last, ‘catching up’ with the many of the citizen’s quotidian narratives; those ordinary and everyday stories of people’s lives that have been pushed to the margins by the hegemonic public discourse of the grand narratives: the Troubles, post-conflict reconciliation and the sectarian divide. While this chapter does not purport to be a comprehensive review of Northern Irish literature, since that is outside my remit for this dissertation, it is a snapshot of several novels and two short story collections to demonstrate what I shall argue is a trajectory in literary representations of Belfast from the capital ‘T’ Troubles to people’s small ‘t’ troubles. After first establishing the argument for using literature as ethnographic data, I will explore the narrative arc that sees social realism in the contemporary Northern Irish novel move from Troubles to post-Troubles and then to the un-Troubled, drawing a parallel with a shift in Northern Irish theatre. Focusing on the work of nine writers and one playwright, I argue that there has been a shift to representations of Belfast that do not portray the conflict, post-conflict or sectarianism at all. However, the pull of the dominant grand narrative, for literature in particular, is still strong.

### **Literature As Ethnographic Data**

Eduardo Archetti calls for anthropologists working in complex, literate societies to consider a variety of texts as ethnographic raw material to discover ‘contrasting

ways of imagining worlds' (1994:26). Almost twenty years earlier, Victor Turner compared two imagined worlds through a study of symbols – those found in Western literature, such as Dante's *Inferno*, and symbolism in African Ndembu ritual. Turner saw each of them as "'metalanguages" for discussing sociality, special ways of talking about general ways of talking and acting' (1976:51). Turner recognises that he employs very different genres (enacted ritual versus written text) to analyse vastly different lifeworlds. Therefore, the correspondence between the two is abstract; about how language and action convey symbolic meaning, rather than what Dante has to say about Ndembu ritual or vice versa. Although Turner viewed African ritual and Western literature as mutually elucidating, I am less convinced. His are good analyses of symbolism, but they sit side by side, the sum being equal to, rather than greater than, the individual parts.

Ruth Finnegan's (1998) study, however, uses a variety of narratives and texts about the city of Milton Keynes that do correspond to and shape each other. Milton Keynes is a 'new city', planned in 1967 and developed over twenty-five years to respond to housing pressure in Greater London. Finnegan uncovers how life there is lived and imagined. She analyses citizens' personal narratives and places these alongside planning documents, academic treatises, newspaper articles, and locals' letters to the newspaper editor. Although much of Finnegan's previous research is on oral literature and poetry (1967; 1977), she refers only briefly to fictional/creative texts about Milton Keynes – a poem and a children's book – possibly because none existed at the time of her research.

By contrast, anthropologist Talal Asad (1990) focuses exclusively on just one work of fiction, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). He analyses the text in the context of Muslim immigration into Britain, how the novel has been read and understood by a range of people, Rushdie's authorial intentions, and the political repercussions that followed publication. Asad focuses on this novel because:

It is a textual representation of some of the things that anthropologists study: religion, migration, gender and cultural identity... it is itself a political act, having political consequences far beyond any that ethnography has ever had... [and] it is generated by the classic encounter

between Western modernity – in which anthropology is situated – and a non-Western Other, which anthropologists typically seek to understand, to analyze, to translate, to represent.

(Asad 1990:239)

*The Satanic Verses* is set over a wide geographical area: Britain, India, Mecca, and a fantastical, imagined world, and Asad's interest is in the novel's portrayal of religion and identity, rather than place. My literary ethnographic research, however, is on novels that are specifically placed in Belfast and I want to look at how they represent lives lived there. The historian K.D.M. Snell describes the regional novel as:

[Fiction] set in a recognisable region [or city], and which describes features distinguishing the life, social relations, customs, language, dialect, or other aspects of the culture of that area and its people.

(1998:1)

He states that by reviewing a multiplicity of novels on one particular region, one can track changes over time in these distinguishing features, such as Hannerz (2013) does in a review of Swedish detective fiction. Snell identifies, for example, how the use of dialect can record changes in 'a living form integral and distinct to the people using it' (1998:32). This is also the domain of linguists of course, just as sociologists will analyse change on a societal level, and the detail and complexity of those analyses contribute to our understanding of what it is to be human. However, the value of the novel in this regard is that it gives a compact picture of a wide range of distinct regional features – descriptions of landscape, moral and political views voiced by characters, dialect and idiom, issues of concern in the area and beyond for the characters etc. As Wolfgang Iser states (in an interview with Richard van Oort), 'What literature does is to stage a whole array of conventions more or less simultaneously in a text' (van Oort 1998).<sup>44</sup> Handler and Segal (1999) argue that novelist Jane Austen is also a social theorist and ethnographer, a witness of social

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<sup>44</sup> Online journal, no page number available.

conventions of courtship, marriage and family. They read her depictions of upper middle-class life in London and Bath as though they 'had entered a social world and were practicing field research in it' and analyse the text as 'a form of social action' (Handler and Segal 1999:149-150). Erving Goffman (1963) too draws on novels to support his work on the nuances of social interaction.

Meanwhile, Thomas Eriksen makes a distinction between novels that provide only ethnographic description, those that can be used as source data, and novels that contribute to public discourse and have 'some of the qualities of a sociological analysis', noting that '*A poor novel may be just as interesting for its ethnographic raw material as a work of genius*' (1994:190-191, original emphasis). This supports my argument for using fictional portrayals of Belfast not only to complement my fieldwork but also to use fiction as a fieldsite in its own right. Nevertheless, one could question the use of fiction as a 'research informant'; anthropologists have a responsibility to represent truthfully the lifeworlds they study, whereas a novelist has no such obligation:

A literary text... can never set out anything factual... that [is why] we call such a text fictional.

(Iser 1989:6)

[The] literary text reveals itself not as discourse, but as 'staged discourse', asking only that the world it represents should be taken as if it were a real world.

(*ibid.* 1989:272)

This can be seen in David Park's novel *The Truth Commissioner* (2008), where he imagines what a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Northern Ireland might be like. The book was subsequently turned into a film with the same title (2016), directed by Declan Recks. When Park was interviewed by Malachi O'Doherty (for BBC 2) he said, 'It's a story, it's a fiction... [not] a documentary-type production... it is a story that comes from the imagination and it is best responded to in the imagination' (O'Doherty 2016). This is what Archetti (1994) is calling for – discovering ways of

imagining – but it is for this reason that Eriksen sees anthropological and literary texts as qualitatively different. He claims you cannot challenge the veracity of a novel in the same way that you can an anthropological text, as the novelist can retort that they made it all up; novels ‘do not profess to represent the truth’ (Eriksen 1994:190). However, Asad does challenge the veracity of the novel, for example, Rushdie’s exposition on Qur’anic rules, some of which, Asad points out, do not appear in the Qur’an. But he concludes that the key question is not one of novelistic fiction versus ethnographic fact, but of identifying the ‘cultural inscriptions’ in a text (Asad 1990:260). It seems clear when political reaction to a book’s content is book burning and death threats Rushdie’s novel is not ‘only a story’ (Asad 1990:258).

On the other hand, to what extent can we rely on the veracity of accounts by research participants? Take Josie, for example, the hairdresser who features in Chapter Five. She recounted her story of the social worker’s story and, as Casey notes, storytelling is an active process. The very act of remembering changes one kind of experience into another (Casey 2000:xxii), so stories will subtly change with each retelling. In Chapter Four I ask Gareth to tell a story in the place it relates to, setting up what Irving refers to as a staged encounter (2007), thus the authorial hand in producing Gareth’s ethnographic data is, in part, mine. In addition, once I author the ethnographic text, literary conventions are used in its construction, as Clifford Geertz (1988) identified. Geertz describes such writing as ‘faction’, meaning ‘imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times’ (Geertz 1988:141). The 1980s marked a ‘literary turn’ in anthropology, as the writing culture debate exposed and celebrated literary conventions in ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fisher 1986; Geertz 1988; Poyatos 1988b). Therefore, the anthropologist’s written account is, to some extent, staged.

Thus, we have fiction as a ‘staged discourse’, fieldwork as a ‘staged encounter’, and ethnographic writing as ‘staged dissemination’, bringing literature and anthropology closer together but without necessarily collapsing those distinctions. Literature can remain as fiction and ethnography as fact. However, there can be a different kind of ‘truth’ in works of fiction, metaphorical rather than literal. Paul Stoller (2016a) urges anthropologists to experiment with alternative ways to convey their ethnographic data, such as novels, poetry, art installations etc., as they can

complement monographs and academic papers to reveal the many truths that fieldwork yields, suggesting that academic writing alone is insufficient and that there is a 'truth' in creative writing and art that can only be found there. Novels and short stories written by anthropologists include Laura Bohannon's *Return to Laughter*, written under a pseudonym (Bowen 1964), Michael Jackson's *Rainshadow* (1988), Mattia Fumanti's *Imagining the Future* (2014) and Paul Stoller's *The Sorcerer's Burden* (2016b). Rapport identifies that ethnography and literature share common interests, particularly with regard to social realist novels where the '*writer [is] intent on publishing stories concerned with detail and prolonged observation and comment on the manners and mores of a social milieu in which he is at one and the same time a participant*' (1994:67, original emphasis). This use of 'participant' and 'observation' in relation to novelists is clearly an intentional link to participant observation as the defining anthropological method. In short, social realist novelists and anthropologists use the same method to collect data and both construct written accounts to represent this reality, both can be used to extrapolate meaning and enhance anthropological understanding, both are equally valid.

Rapport (1994) analyses the works of E. M. Forster alongside his fieldwork in a small village in northern England by zig-zagging between them; a going back and forth between the two to see if this reveals a 'truth' that can illuminate one or both. This is an active process but it is not about combining or overlapping the data. Each piece of data retains its integrity. For example, novels remain a work of fiction and field notes remain observed reality. In the process of moving between the two, Rapport constructs meaning at the interface of author and reader, even when he occupies both positions. This allows him to develop ideas that are not present in their entirety in either data set but are relevant to both, and it is the active process of reading back and forth that produces this. Rapport refers to this as 'gaining insight' and 'hitting on the truth' (1994:32).

If Literature and Anthropology, as genres of writing, have a number of basic interconnections, as I have argued, then it should be possible to read one as if it were the other and still make some sense; to read Forster's writings as an anthropological account and to read an account

of Wanet as if literary (....) [It is] an imaginative mixing of interpretive strategies (....) [It is] a metaphoric exercise, therefore, and one intent on elucidating significant possible correspondences.

(Rapport 1994:29)

For Rapport, anthropology and the novel are '*corresponding ways of writing social realism*' (1994:22, original emphasis). I will now consider how Belfast has been represented in social realist fiction and the extent to which this reflects the social reality I observed in my fieldwork. In doing so, this chapter takes a slightly different route from the rest of my dissertation in that I begin with three novels that deal in different ways with the capital 'T' Troubles before contrasting this with contemporary novels and short stories and their small 't' troubles. My intention here is to use literature as ethnographic data in two ways. First, to consider how the subject matter of the Troubles and post-conflict Belfast is portrayed – what 'voice' is used – and what advantages and limitations there are to that. Second, to make the argument that, although there has been a shift away from Troubles to troubles as a reflection of current quotidian narratives, the former still acts as a powerful pull on novelists. In other words, novels and short stories are a reflection of local concerns but they can also play to the stereotype of Belfast that readers have come to expect.

### **Changing Portrayals Of Belfast**

Three academics have comprehensively reviewed portrayals of Belfast in Northern Irish literature up to 2005, which demonstrates a trajectory from invisibility (Hewitt 2003), to a Troubled city of depravity (Hughes 1996), and then on to a Bakhtinian carnivalesque city (Schwerter 2007). Hewitt's essay considered the Northern Irish novel up to 1918 (i.e. before the partition of Ireland) and identified that only two dealt specifically with Belfast: Archibald McIlroy's *A Banker's Story* (1901) and James Douglas's *The Unpardonable Sin* (1907). Even then the city is somewhat disguised, with name changes to 'Spindleborough' and 'Bigotsborough' (Hewitt 2003:81). Eamonn Hughes' literature review takes up where Hewitt left off, but he focuses particularly on the thirty years up to the 1994 ceasefires, the period almost



concurrent with the Troubles. Not surprisingly, many novels depict Belfast as 'mad, bad and dangerous' (Hughes 1996:147), and fall into the thriller genre. These novels are referred to by Bowyer Bell (somewhat disparagingly) as 'The Troubles as Trash', where the aim is 'to entertain rather than enlighten' (1978:22), the alliterative Troubles trash coming into common parlance for all Troubles-related entertainment. Hughes notes that, in an attempt to understand the madness of the city, many novels' protagonists take to the hills surrounding Belfast to look down on the wholeness of the metropolis from afar and up above, as if 'the only way to comprehend the city is to leave it, to become an observer rather than a participant' (1996:144). Here Hughes echoes the language of ethnographic fieldwork and invokes the image of de Certeau (1998) looking down on the *wandersmänner*. Belfast is depicted as doomed, 'a city of divisions and borders', where even romantic storylines are about 'love across the barricades' (Hughes 1996:149 and 152).

Attempts to comprehend the 'madness' can also come from looking at it from afar, geographically and temporally. Novelist Pat Gray was born in Belfast in 1953, to English parents, and lived there until he went to university in England aged eighteen. He has lived and worked primarily in Britain ever since, with careers in public administration and then as an academic. When I met him at London Metropolitan University in 2014, he described the enormous disparity he experienced when he first came to Britain, between English attitudes and lifestyle, in a politically-stable country, to what he was used to in Belfast, where instability was the norm and violence, when not being enacted, was always hovering just beneath the surface. Pat went back for family visits, although less and less frequently, until about 1980. But it was not until 1995 that he revisited his first eighteen years in an attempt to understand them, and he chose to do this in the form of autobiographical fiction.

Gray's novel *The Political Map of the Heart* was eventually published in 2001 but it began life as the winning entry for the 1995 World One Day Novel Cup, a twenty-four hour writing competition. He had not really reflected much on his life in Belfast before then but, having entered the competition, he told me in interview, 'it needed to be autobiographical because I didn't have time to plot it out'. In the novel, the (closely-named) protagonist Pat Grant describes his pre-Troubles, largely

untroubled, childhood with his middle-class, well-educated family; his father is a lecturer at Queen's University and the intellectual conversation at family dinner parties often goes over Pat's head. But life becomes more difficult when Pat goes to a Protestant grammar school. There is a culture of bullying, and his name, Patrick, puts him at risk: 'They'd been dragging all of the first years through the toilets, one by one, to find out if by any chance there'd been any Catholics slip unnoticed into the school' (Gray 2001:57). On this occasion he escapes a beating because the bullies are nonplussed when Pat says he is Plymouth Brethren, as it does not fall into their simplistic sectarian dichotomy. Meanwhile, Pat's older brother, James, becomes radicalised as a republican, causing anxiety for his parents. Much of the novel centres on Pat's happy but doomed relationship with Elaine, a Protestant, and although this is not exactly love-across-the-barricades, his brother's association with republicanism and Catholicism puts obstacles in their way.

I am interested here in what way temporal and geographic distance from the subject matter has influenced the author, but first I want to consider the notion of social realism in more detail, and to discuss the work of two other writers, Christopher Marsh and Robert McLiam Wilson, before returning to Gray's novel and a Rapportian zig-zag between all three.

### ***Social realism***

Fernando Poyatos states that literature 'constitutes without doubt the richest source of documentation about human life-styles' and that this is done primarily by describing behaviours, environments, the interaction of characters, and the ideas and mores they portray (1988b:4). He identifies six types of realism evident in social novels: physical (sensorial perception); distortion (ridicule, exaggeration); individualising (character differentiation); psychological (inner life of characters); interactive (dialogue and face-to-face encounters); and documentary realism (including non-verbal behaviour). One of Hughes' criticisms of fictional depictions of the conflict in Belfast is that the city becomes 'a void filled by novelists and film-makers with stock properties' (1996:141). Hughes quotes from Glenn Patterson's novel *Fat Lad*, where a Swedish film crew is recording footage outside a school and the schoolchildren were 'just being themselves (...) only more so' (Patterson

1992:238) and he contrasts this with the work of Ciaran Carson, who, Hughes claims, explores Belfast 'as it is experienced' (Hughes 1996:143).

Applying Poyatos's classification to Troubles thrillers and to Patterson's schoolchildren, we see they use distorting realism, with exaggeration to make the point, whereas Carson relies on documentary realism. I now consider how realism in my selection of novels corresponds with my fieldwork observations. Of course, there is an inherent problematic in this proposition, in that both novels and ethnography are only ever partial accounts, partial truths as Clifford and Marcus (1986) call it, since it is impossible to capture the wholeness of an experience in writing (hence Stoller's call for complementary means of dissemination). They are accounts preserved at a moment in time, in the fixity of the text and the temporal moments they describe. To overcome this somewhat, I shall use Rapport's zig-zagging method to see what insight the movement between novel and fieldwork reveals and whether there is, as Rapport suggests, a hitting on a truth.

Stephanie Schwerter's review of Troubles literature written after the 1994 ceasefires noted a growing trend towards humorous subversion, declaring it to be 'a turning point in the literary discourse of the Northern Ireland conflict' (2007:19). Christopher Marsh's (2008) novel *A Year in the Province* falls into this category and he uses distorting realism to great effect. Both the title and the concept are an explicit reference to *A Year in Provence*, Peter Mayle's (1990) semi-autobiographical and bucolic novel of an English middle-class couple moving to France. Marsh turns this conceit on its head. Jesús and his wife Begoña move from a seemingly idyllic but ultimately boring life in rural Andalucía to Belfast, where Jesús teaches history at the (fictional) Royal University of Belfast. With little understanding of the intricacies of life in Northern Ireland, the scene is set for a hilarious story of misunderstanding and mishap, and an illuminating insight into an outsider's viewpoint. Marsh uses satire, absurdity and intricate word-play in the style of Jonathan Swift and Flann O'Brien. For example, moving from prose to rhyme within a sentence, writing in dialect, and being playful with names – it is surely no authorial accident that it is Jesus and Be-gone-ya who are having a ball in Belfast. One anthropological insight in the book concerns a seminar Jesús gives on the introduction of grey squirrels to Northern Ireland and the impact this has on native reds. The student discussion gets heated

(and increasingly absurd), with calls for infertility drugs to be injected into the squirrels' nuts, and eventually a fight ensues between one faction of students, with 'Protestant' names such as William, and the other faction, including Declan, a 'Catholic' name. Marsh then changes from dialect, hilarity and innuendo to a more sombre tone as Jesús muses:

Now amidst the tumult, I remember something Connor had said to me:  
"Listen to us carefully. We may seem to be talking about general issues, but half the time we're actually occupied with the particular politics of the north." Was it possible, I wondered, that the students were not talking about squirrels at all?

(Marsh 2008:179-180)

A novel has one author, with its author-intentioned meaning, and is written at one point in time (Winner 1988). The point that Marsh wishes to make is that the students were not talking about squirrels at all but about the competing rights of (fertile) Catholics and (invading) Protestants to reside in Northern Ireland. However, this is superficially masked with a zoological flavour, demonstrating just how the 'particular politics of the north' are often played out. Reading is an active process; a dialogue between the text and the reader (Ochs and Capps 2001), such that 'meaning lies in the shared ground where the reader and text meet' (Probst 1994:38). This leads to multiple reader-received meanings, which are read over time, and none of these meanings operate in a cultural vacuum (Winner 1988). To an outsider, the causes and effects of the conflict in Northern Ireland can seem puzzling, since the citizens appear to be more like each other than anyone else from Britain or Ireland (so this novel could be read and understood merely as an absurdist romp), but it would be naïve and insulting to articulate this directly to some people in Belfast, particularly if one is knowledgeable about the basis for it. Thus, the humour of the novel is more acute if one does have prior understanding of this particular means of local discourse. Marsh is able to highlight this absurdity from Jesús's naïve-outsider point of view, being a character from a different country and lifestyle. Christopher Marsh is himself Professor of History at Queen's University,

Belfast, an Englishman who has lived in the city for many years, beautifully illustrating the point that Paul Stoller makes about the complementary genres an academic can employ to reveal a complexity of truths. Novelist Christopher Marsh can articulate, with absurdist simplicity, what Academic Professor Marsh would have to render as theoretically complex; by using a different voice he can reveal a 'truth' through absurdity. Meanwhile what the reader brings to the text is a further complexity of meaning depending on their prior knowledge of the city and its citizens. However, I now wish to consider a different stylistic approach to the Troubles and what meaning readers can take from that.

In Schwerter's review of Northern Irish literature, she refers only briefly to Robert McLiam Wilson's novel *Eureka Street* (Wilson 1998), suggesting it is as an example of one of the 'best known post-Ceasefire narratives characterised by a comical take' (Schwerter 2007:19). But my reading of this book is that it uses several types of realism to make a very serious point. Set six months on either side of the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires, it follows the lives, loves and often-hilarious exploits of two friends – Jake, a hopeless romantic who muddles through relationships with his girlfriend and his cat, and Chuckie, who has little formal education but a lot of entrepreneurial spirit, and who launches a series of increasingly bizarre but successful ways to raise funds. Eric Reimer notes that *Eureka Street* intentionally subverts the usual Troubles literary devices as it marginalises sectarianism. For example, Chuckie is a Protestant who is enthralled by Catholic rituals, and the novel installs 'simple normality as its operating principle' (Reimer 2010:96). This is all told through funny and irreverent language and quick plot progression. The novel pivots around two central chapters, literally and metaphorically. Placed half-way through the book, they not only separate the story's focus on Jake then Chuckie, but lead the reader to view the humour in the second half of the novel differently. These chapters are written in a very different style from what precedes and succeeds them. In chapter ten, an omniscient narrator walks the streets of Belfast at night and recounts the city in lyrical terms, reminiscent of the opening of Dylan Thomas's (1995) *Under Milk Wood*. Belfast is depicted as beautiful despite being deeply, and fatally, flawed:

You see leafy streets and you see leafless streets. You can imagine leafy lives and leafless ones. In the plump suburbs and the concrete districts your eyes see some truths, some real difference. (...) In this city, the natives live in a broken world – broken but beautiful.

(Wilson 1998:214-215)

In chapter eleven, a new character, Rosemary Daye, is introduced in sensual language and over several pages. But as she steps into a sandwich shop she suddenly stops existing. In cold, clinical language – and graphic detail – the rest of the chapter describes the effects of a bomb:

The largest part of one of the glass display cases blasted in her direction. Though fragmented before it reached her, the pieces of shrapnel and glass were still large enough to kill her instantly. (...) The rim of the display case, which was in three large sections, sliced through or embedded in her recently praised hips and (...) one substantial chunk of glass whipped through her midriff, taking her inner stuff half-way through the large hole in her back...

(Wilson 1998:222)

Although Laura Pelaschiar states that, 'Wilson's novel is *not* about the Troubles', she acknowledges that, 'few bombs in the many pages written on the Troubles have had such a devastating effect on the reader' (2000:130, original emphasis). When I interviewed Wilson in 2008 he told me it was important for him to write a love letter to Belfast and then to blow it apart. When *Eureka Street* is viewed within the canon of Northern Irish literature, the placing of these two chapters in the centre of what is an otherwise picaresque novel put it on the cusp of the literary turns described by Hughes and Schwerter, since it deals with the mad, bad and dangerous city and also with the carnivalesque. As a reader, the meaning I derive from this is that irony and absurdity have an important place in Wilson's novel about Belfast, but the horror of the reality of the Troubles cannot be totally dismissed. Wilson uses the whole array of Poyatos's realisms in his novel, but it is the

sharp juxtaposition of distorting and documentary realism that have the most profound effect.

This now brings me back to Pat Gray's novel and Rapport's zig-zag method. When I move between *A Year in the Province* (Marsh 2008), *Eureka Street* (Wilson 1998), *The Political Map of the Heart* (Gray 2001), my interviews with Wilson in 2008 and with Gray in 2014, and the list of Poyatos's descriptions of realism in novels, it reveals an interesting absence from Poyatos's classification. In a postscript to Gray's novel the author addresses the reader directly and describes three short memories. In the second one he is lying in bed, remembering:

I am out shopping, although I cannot remember for what precisely. (...) I feel my mind working leadenly, sluggishly. Was I meant to be getting shoes? (...) Ah, it is the photographs for my bus pass. I place the money in the slot of the photo-booth. It is ten forty-eight precisely (the memory seems cluttered with such details) (...) The camera flashes, once, twice, three times and I pull a face for the fourth, squinting and turning up the corners of my mouth. As I do so, there's a huge blast in the street outside and when I come out the station is full of dust and people running.

(Gray 2001:179)

Gray takes refuge in the Washington Bar, where people are watching television, 'they say there's been a blitz in Belfast' (2001:179), but the barman and the customers are only mildly interested in the news. Then a bomb warning for the Washington Bar is announced, the locals mutter about having to leave their beers behind, and they all go out into the street. Pat half-walks, half-runs into a nearby shopping street and hears another bomb go off, and 'a few bits of light, dusty debris fall on us, like rain from the heavens' (2001:180).

Gray's *post-scriptum* is not written emotionally but in a factual, almost distanced, way. Although he uses a direct authorial voice, the writing style is not dissimilar to that in the rest of the novel and it appears to be an example of Poyatos's documentary realism. Gray's style is quite different from Wilson's cold, clinical description of a bomb, juxtaposed with sensuous descriptions of Rosemary

Daye, loving descriptions of Belfast at night, and humorous dialogue to describe Jake's and Chuckie's lives. It is different again from how Marsh uses the absurd so well in his novel. But when I zig-zag between the novels, the interviews and Poyatos's list, this reveals more than just different writing styles.

Pat Gray offered to meet with me after another academic from London Metropolitan University mentioned my PhD fieldwork, and my interview with him in December 2014 was the first and only time we met. I had read his novel and began the interview with a quick overview of my research interests, one of which being the link between story and place. Pat talked about his family and schooling in Belfast, which highlighted the close, autobiographical nature of his novel. I asked if he had any particular place in Belfast associated with a personal story and he began to tell me about getting some passport photographs taken in a photo-booth in the bus station on Great Victoria Street (in the centre of Belfast). At this point he faltered, and began to cry, sobbed, tried to control his emotions and said: 'I knew this would happen'. I stopped the digital voice-recorder but after a short while he began talking again and said I could continue recording. He told me that the day the bomb went off, when he was in the bus station, was Bloody Friday. This was on 21 July 1972:

[B]etween nineteen and twenty-two bombs – the exact number varies in the different accounts – exploded throughout Belfast in the space of just over an hour; nine of them in an eighteen-minute period, six within three minutes. Nine people were killed and a hundred and thirty injured, some very badly.

(Moloney 2010:103)

However, it was not until I was writing this chapter, some eighteen months later, that I noted the discrepancy in Pat's depictions of the bombs, i.e. between the distanced tone in the novel afterword (where Bloody Friday is not explicitly mentioned) and his emotional account in the interview. When I compared it with Wilson and Marsh, and looked to Poyatos for some clues, I realised that none of Poyatos's six types of realism gave me a satisfactory explanation. It is as though Pat's experience was too painful to be written about in his autobiographical novel other



than as a *post-scriptum*, an afterthought. There is an absence of emotional realism here. Wilson, meanwhile, *imaginatively* writes about a bomb's effects in his novel.

Gray's novel reflects on his life in Belfast from a geographic and temporal distance. It was first written in London almost twenty-five years after he left Northern Ireland to go to university, and when he describes the bombs in his novel *Bloody Friday* is unnamed, although I realise with hindsight that it is hinted at in the comment about a 'blitz'. But there is also a psychological distance between the subdued emotion in the words on the page and the vivid, emotional and upsetting memories he experienced when I spoke to him. But this psychological distance will not be evident to someone who has only read the book. Thus, Wilson's imaginative voice reveals a truth about the effects of a bomb that Gray found difficult to do.

Richard Kearney believes that Anglo-Irish writers explore how fiction enables the retelling of history to make a story of what might have been:

[Poetic] lies, which ostensibly distort the truth, can contrive at times to tell another kind of truth, *sometimes a truer truth*.

(Kearney 2002:23-25, my emphasis)

Gray's novel is fiction but it is so closely autobiographical that it could almost be considered a memoir. Scarry (1985) notes that pain destroys language, a feature that Donnan and Simpson (2007) encountered in their work with Protestants living in South Armagh (see also Jackson 2006). In Gray's *post-scriptum* the reader-constructed meaning is hampered by a lack of context; thus, it is zig-zagging between fictional texts (Gray's and Wilson's), interviews with the authors, and with theory, that hits on the truth, as Rapport asserts.

I have written at some length about three novels relating to the Troubles for two reasons. First, although the focus of my dissertation is on Not-the-Troubles, to ignore them completely would be to fall prey to the same distortion that promulgates the hegemony of Troubled grand narratives. But also, in discussing the next 'literary turn' that Northern Irish literature has taken, I do not want to denigrate Troubles literature. These novels were written and published when the Troubles were on-going or very recent, particularly Gray's and Wilson's. When I interviewed

Robert McLiam Wilson in 2008, I commented on the backward-looking nature of Northern Irish novels, particularly the focus on the Troubles. He had a bleak view of the future in Northern Ireland (he has lived in France for many years):

The past is absolutely present in Belfast and has a cynicism which means the future, talking about the future in Belfast is embarrassing, it's naïve, no one does it (...). Being a product of Belfast, what I most remember [was that] in Andytown [a local term for Andersontown in west Belfast] the future was elsewhere; the future wasn't a time it was a place, it was where you went, somewhere else.

(Wilson 2008, personal communication 7 July 2008)

Notwithstanding, I will now consider how the content of recent novels and short stories has shifted as writers reflect a different, contemporary social realism of Belfast where the future may not look exactly bright, but it is not one necessarily fixated on the orange and the green.

### ***Beyond the Troubles***

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to Jo Baker's *Offcomer* and commented on the lack of Troubles references and the barely-hinted-at sectarianism in the Belfast she described. Amidst the wealth of Troubles-related literature set in Belfast these absences stand out. In this section I argue that Baker is reflecting how Belfast's history does not necessarily impinge on people's quotidian lives to the extent that one would discern from the canon of Northern Irish literature, and that other novelists are beginning to reflect this too.

*Offcomer* was Baker's first novel and its title means 'outsider' (Oxford English Dictionary 2017c). Baker moved to Belfast in 1995 to do a creative writing degree at Queen's University, after completing her undergraduate degree in Oxford (Baker n.d.). Thus it could be argued that the absence of Troubles is because she writes from an outsider's perspective and that she represents the very different attitudes and lifestyle in England that Pat Gray found when he went to university there. However, that would be to downplay the role of the outsider, to suggest that only

those from within a particular place are somehow qualified to write of its 'truth'. I do not subscribe to this view: there is not one truth, one version, but as many truths and versions as there are individuals. An outsider view may be different, but it is not lesser. Furthermore, novelists born and bred in Northern Ireland are also reflecting a social reality that has moved on from the Troubles.

For example, in Ciaran Carson's novel *The Pen Friend*, protagonist Gabriel Conway receives an unsigned postcard with an enigmatic message written on it: 'It's been a long time' (2009:1). However, he recognises Nina's handwriting, a woman with whom he had a love affair in the 1980s, twenty years earlier. Gabriel collects fountain pens and he chooses one to write a reply to Nina, even though he has no address to send his letter to. Thus, Carson sets up the structure of this epistolary novel. Another twelve equally enigmatic postcards arrive and Gabriel uses twelve more fountain pens to continue his unsent letter, in which he reminisces about his relationship with Nina, his father's interest in Esperanto, and his own interest in nineteenth century psychic research. The setting of the novel ranges from New York to Dublin via London and Berlin, but begins in, and frequently returns to, Belfast, Gabriel's hometown where he met and fell in love with Nina. Temporally the book moves (primarily) between the 1980s and early 2000s.

Although descriptions of Belfast are peppered throughout Carson's novel, there are very few references to the Troubles or to sectarianism – a mention of the divided city here, or a passing comment on the sound of surveillance helicopters there; a note that 'Belfast is booming, and not with bombs' (2009:107). These hints and comments have no further explanation. They are background details, faintly painted by the text, and in the context of Gabriel's and Nina's relationship they would need no further explanation as they would share an understanding of life in Belfast in the 1980s. But even though the dénouement of the story is that Nina was probably working as a secret agent, possibly for the British government, and she ensured that Gabriel was not in a particular bar when a bomb went off, this is written in an understated way and in the context of their love affair, rather than as a dramatic scene. It is as if Carson is writing of Belfast as he sees it, not writing for an audience that needs to be told (or expects to read) what Belfast was, or might have been, like. This documentary realism may be why Eamonn Hughes praised Carson's

(earlier) writing, stating 'there is as intense an exploration of city life, as it is experienced in Belfast, as one could hope for' (Hughes 1996:143).

However, it is the body of work by David Park that most usefully illustrates the new trajectory that Northern Irish literature seems to be taking. From Park's first collection of short stories, *Oranges From Spain* (1990), through his next six novels, *The Healing* (1992), *The Rye Man* (1994), *Stone Kingdoms* (1996), *The Big Snow* (2002), *Swallowing the Sun* (2004) and *The Truth Commissioner* (2008), the subject matter of all but one deal with Troubled or sectarian Belfast. As Park explained in a 2012 interview, published on the Culture Northern Ireland website: 'As a writer you felt a moral obligation (...) You had to deal with the Troubles. Our history, our situation, could be almost claustrophobic, but it wasn't something that could be ignored' (Moore 2012). As Eamonn Hughes expresses it, 'the past has been unhealthily fascinating, forcing us to look away from the future, and the sense of futurity' (Hughes 2000:10). However, in *The Truth Commissioner* Park begins a temporal transition when he imagines a future Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Northern Ireland and how it might affect the people involved. He comes to the conclusion that the truth does not always heal:

[W]hat the plaintiffs want is truth and the justice that they feel they've been denied (...) Instead they get some formulaic, pre-learned response that expressed a vague regret for the pain caused and then presents the get-out-of-jail card that avoids personal guilt or moral culpability by stating that they believed they were fighting a war.

(Park 2008:246)

Lawler notes that life stories are based on memories that interpret the past but which can then formulate 'present and future life stories' (2014:32). In his fictional account, Park seeks to understand the conflict by going forwards into an imagined future to contemplate the past, rather than only looking backwards to understand it, as Kierkegaard (1996) famously stated.

Park's seventh and eighth novels have an anchor to Northern Ireland but move away from Belfast, reminiscent of Wilson's comment to me, referred to earlier, that

the future is another place. Although the opening scene in *The Light of Amsterdam* (2012) is in Belfast, at footballer George Best's funeral, and all of the six main characters live in the city, the action of the novel takes place almost exclusively in Amsterdam – Jack takes his son to a Bob Dylan concert, Karen and her daughter go on a hen weekend, and Marian and Richard celebrate her birthday there. The stories are about difficult relationships and sometimes-difficult lives and Belfast is merely where the characters hail from. Meanwhile, in *The Poets' Wives* (2014), Park imagines the lives of three women as they deal with their husbands' poetic legacies – Catherine Blake, wife of poet William; Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of poet Osip; and the contemporary, but fictional, Lydia and Don, the latter a recently deceased Irish poet. In the last of this trilogy, Lydia revisits their holiday cottage on the north Antrim coast and contemplates the loneliness she felt in her marriage, finds an unpublished poem written to their deceased son, and longs for a closer relationship with her adult daughters.

In Moore's interview with Park, referred to above, which was several months after *The Light of Amsterdam* was published, Park stated that Northern Irish literature had become too introspective and parochial:

I think we have been damaged by [Northern Ireland's past] in ways we don't realise. The Troubles acted as a brake on our creative development, but now there are exciting possibilities for art to flourish.

(Moore 2012)

It seems that, with these two novels, Park needed, metaphorically and creatively, to move away from Belfast. The city ceases to be a focus or a phenomenon; these novels are now about something else with Belfast being mere background context (if anything at all). However, Park returns to the city in his latest collection of short stories *Gods and Angels* (2016) and this time the transition is not just a geographical one: he writes about a non-Troubled Belfast.

For example, in the short story 'Learning to Swim', Henry is writing a post-doctoral thesis at Queen's University on the poet John Donne. While taking swimming lessons in a local leisure centre, he is befriended by three burly, gold-

necklaced men, Eddie, Sam and George, whose bodies, interests and extravagance with money provide a sharp contrast to Henry, a pale, skinny and impoverished academic. There is the faintest hint that the men may have been involved in unsavoury activity in the past, but the reader has to construct that meaning in the unwritten, in the combination of burly men, Belfast and history. For example, when Henry is given a lift home in Sam's van he asks:

'What do you guys do?'

'We're in partnership,' he said, 'the three of us.'

There was a silence for a few seconds, long enough for me to wonder if that was to be the extent of his explanation.

'We're in a lot of stuff – property, buy-to-lets, a couple of clubs and franchises, some retail units – that sort of thing.'

'Right,' I said, 'and you guys go back a long way?'

'A long way,' he repeated and I sensed as he stared out of the side window that the conversation had concluded.

(Park 2016:9)

Although this quotation from the text could take on more sinister undertones in the reader's imagination, it is still just the merest hint of the Troubles, an absence, in much the same way (if not more so) that we observed in Baker's *Offcomer* and Carson's *The Pen Friend*. This short story is about Eddie dying of cancer and he wants Henry to help him find a suitable poem to read at his upcoming wedding: troubles not Troubles.

In only one of Park's short stories is the past conflict referred to directly. In 'The Strong Silent Type', Abi borrows a male mannequin from a friend who works in a clothes shop and dresses him up as her escort to the school prom. In the taxi on the way to the dance, the taxi driver tells Abi he wishes all of his passengers were as quiet and well-behaved as the mannequin, unlike some of his customers:

‘I’ve seen it all,’ he says, ‘and then something more. But at least the Troubles are over.’ Abi says, ‘That’s right,’ but it’s as if she’s not really listening to him and she’s heard it all before.

(Park 2016:79)

The cab-driver tries to tell Abi of the past dangers of his profession<sup>45</sup> but she really is not listening and he muses to himself, ‘You young ones don’t know you’re born’ (Park 2016:80). Even though this is a direct reference to the Troubles, the taxi-driver’s past travails are of no interest to Abi because she has her own issues to deal with. Although her friends were delighted by her inventiveness and audacity in taking a mannequin to the prom, she cries herself to sleep that night because she does not have the human boyfriend that she wants: troubles trumping Troubles.

Of the thirteen short stories in *Gods and Angels*, only three are specifically set in Belfast. This is not to say that Park should write about Belfast, of course, but given that his work up to 2008 is deeply rooted in the city, the hints at, or absence of, Belfast in his last two novels and most of this short story collection is worth remarking on. For example, in ‘Gecko’ there is a mention of City Hall; this could be the iconic building that has a commanding position in Belfast city centre... or it could be any city hall anywhere. Maybe, for Park, Belfast is returning to being the invisible city that Hewitt (2003) identified in late nineteenth/early twentieth century literature, almost as though Belfast-without-the-Troubles has become Belfast-without-an-identity.

### ***Belfast as a Global Literary Trope***

In the introduction to this chapter, I set up the proposition that Belfast writers are, at last, catching up, with the non-Troubled quotidian narratives of Belfast’s citizens and my use of the gerund, the indefinite present tense, is intentional. Despite the individual examples I identify, I do not believe that, as a body of writers, they have yet ‘caught up’. Although the research focus in my fieldwork in 2014 was on not-the-Troubles narratives – and thus I could be accused of sample bias – it was during my

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<sup>45</sup> Taxi-drivers were frequent targets for both republican and loyalist paramilitary groups (Sutton Index of Deaths n.d.).

Master's fieldwork in 2007/8 that I noticed a lack of Troubles stories in quotidian narratives (see Introduction). In 2014, when I explained to potential research participants my interest in the ordinary and everyday, not related to conflict or post-conflict reconciliation, they responded positively, some sighing with relief or even gushing forth with stories of their lives. In my observations of my own daily life there, even though I lived on the edge of the Village, a loyalist enclave in the city, mundane matters constituted most of my conversations with neighbours. In this section I want to consider why this subject matter is not quantitatively or qualitatively reflected in published literature and will argue that Belfast is stereotyped as a Troubled city, and not just by novelists and their readership, but also in academic literature.

Ulster University hosts the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN). This lists four hundred and one novels published between 1969 and 2002 that deal with the Troubles (Conflict Archive on the Internet, n.d., a). There is no information beyond this date and no corresponding information on non-Troubles novels, which itself points to the hegemony of Troubled Belfast. Of course, the *raison d'être* of CAIN is to record data relating to the conflict, but I have been unable to locate any non-conflict archive or a review of non-Troubles literature elsewhere. Despite this, my sense is that novels and short stories that deal in the non-Troubled quotidian are far fewer in number, certainly disproportionate to the non-Troubles quotidian narratives of contemporary Belfast's citizens.

It is understandable that there is such interest in the Troubles. As Pettitt remarks, from the moment in October 1968, when [Northern] Irish broadcasters UTV and RTÉ filmed the RUC attacking a civil rights march in Londonderry, 'Overnight Northern Ireland became an international media story' (2000:227), particularly given that the BBC chose to purchase the RTÉ footage as being 'more dramatic' (Cathcart 1984:208). Throughout the Troubles there was a desire by creative artists to describe what was happening and why (see earlier quote from David Park), and the dramatic nature of the Troubles, such as rioting, bombings, 3,720 people killed, punishment beatings, state collusion with paramilitaries etc. lends itself very easily to dramatic interpretations and imaginings, particularly in the thriller genre where it provided 'an ideal landscape for tough guys embroiled in violence, chase and psychological terror'



(Kincaid 2010:53). Chakravorty states that in literary contexts, 'stereotypes muddle distinctions between real, historical conditions, and their surreal aesthetic figurations' (2014:5-6). The mutual reinforcement of Troubles as news and Troubles as creative endeavour combine to produce a powerful portrayal of Northern Ireland as an 'atavistic nation' (Brown 2010:88).

However, for Rapport, stereotypes need not be seen in an entirely negative light. He considers how, for lives lived increasingly in flux and movement, a preoccupation with, and interpretation of, stereotypes can be a way for individuals to anchor themselves to notions of stability, order and home. Rapport does not see this in any way as deterministic, as a product of the environment and lifeworlds that the individuals hail from, but as individual choice (Rapport 1995). This leads me to consider the notion of readings of home and to question for whom literature about Northern Ireland, and specifically about Belfast, is written. To put the question more starkly, are Troubles stories as a literary trope driven by a strong commercial sensibility? In regional novels, the city or the region becomes a character in the story and that character can become somewhat formulaic:

Regional writers have created or (more commonly) perpetuated such stereotypes for the sake of sales, through disinclination to break with tried and tested formulae, for ideological or racial reasons, or through attachment to literary clichés.

(Snell 1998:36)

Northern Ireland has a population of 1.8 million, the United States of 308 million. And the Troubles sell. They sell as the dark tourism of taxi tours of the Falls and Shankill Roads (Nagle 2012), they sell in the film industry with forty-three Troubles films released since 1968 (Conflict Archive on the Internet n.d., b), focusing primarily on Irish nationalist and republican ideology (McIlroy 2001); and they sell as Troubles literature. This is Belfast with a frisson of fear (Neill 2001). For example, three months after *Ghosts of Belfast* (Neville 2009) was published, which Kincaid describes as 'a noir thriller that plays out in a city that even in summer sunshine remains oppressively gray', he remarks that 'it sits in the top twenty best-seller list

for independent U.S. bookstores' (Kincaid 2010:45). Meanwhile, Paul McVeigh's recently published debut novel *The Good Son* opens with, 'I was born the day the Troubles started' (2015:1). The book humorously describes growing up in the Ardoyne in North Belfast while the book jacket shows a child holding a gun. I suggest this is not just part of a Troubles trope (Wulff 2015), but a commodification of Belfast's Troubled history, one that embeds itself in the literary discourse on Northern Ireland and stereotypes Belfast as a city of conflict or recovering from conflict.

This hegemonic discourse is also reflected in academic analyses of Belfast literature, film and other creative media: searches of JStor or Google Scholar or Project Muse yield much on Troubled Belfast and very little on non-Troubled contemporary literature. For example, Birte Heidemann's (2016) book analyses post-Agreement literature in Northern Ireland, which she defines as:

A body of texts – fiction, poetry and drama – that is shaped by the literary sensibilities of writers who grew up during the Troubles (1960s to 1980s) and published their works in the aftermath of the Agreement and whose formal-aesthetic expressions draw upon but also deviate from the preceding generations of contemporary Northern Irish writers.

(Heidemann 2016:5)

'Post-Agreement' here is a temporal definition, referring to the age of the writers, when their books were published and the contemporary times they take as their subject matter. Heidemann's analysis focuses almost exclusively on works that relate to the conflict in one way or another, particularly with regard to novels. My interest in literature as ethnographic data has a different inflection, i.e. to what extent does published literature reflect non-Troubled quotidian narratives? However, as a recent academic treatment of contemporary Northern Irish literature, Heidemann's book is an important contribution to the debate.

Heidemann analyses her chosen texts through the lens of post-colonial theory, arguing that 'the [1921] annexation of Northern Ireland to its bygone coloniser has effectively turned it into a 'border country' par excellence' (2016:8); also that the

uncertain post-Agreement political see-saw between devolved government and its suspensions led to what she calls a 'negative liminal state' that writers are not only responding to but are influenced by. This certainly throws light on why the Troubles still exert a pull on writers. However, although she concludes that for the novelists, poets and playwrights she reviews, 'the violent past does not necessarily configure as the dominant trope of their writings', this is what she focuses on, and she refers to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement as an 'event of symbolic violence' (2016:235). Hughes has criticised the post-colonial 'moment' in literary studies as one that 'can stretch into ahistoricism' (Hughes 2000:6), and I suggest that Heidemann falls into this trap. Although the Agreement was not unanimously voted for in the 1998 referendum regarding its adoption, with 71% voting in favour (Hayes and Mcallister 2001), to call it symbolic violence, as well as Heidemann's other language use, such as (previously quoted) Northern Ireland's annexation to its bygone coloniser, suggests a particular (nationalist) historiographical position. Moreover, Heidemann views one of her chosen texts, Daragh Carville's (2009) thoroughly non-Troubled play *This Other City* through a Troubled lens that I suggest distorts her analysis. Heidemann finds Troubled demons in the playscript that are simply not there.

I conducted some research on the theatre in Belfast and will mention it briefly here. The inclusion of theatre in my fieldwork was accidental and serendipitous, as initially I went purely for entertainment. However, the first three shows I saw were all non-Troubled representations of life in the city. For example, Jonathan Bailie's play, *All There Is* (2014), deals with a number of themes – loneliness, dementia and a Good Samaritan act that goes wrong – and is structured around the violent consequences of an addiction to hard drugs. These are contemporary problems in Northern Ireland. The play was well scripted and acted, and minimalist staging engaged audience imagination in what was a tense thriller. However, my reason for discussing it here is that, in the play, none of the characters had names, the city is not named and the places evoked by the staging are not placed in any particular part of any particular city. In other words, *all the telling signs are stripped out*. Bailie told me this was intentional:

The play is set in a 'Nowhere' sort of place. It was definitely set here [in Northern Ireland] but it wasn't confined by any of the things that we associate with Northern Irish people or the place itself, because I think people are fed up with that. (...) I didn't want there to be any reference points at all, and that meant no names [and] no actual Derry [or Belfast] landmarks. It was brought off by saying 'going off to the estate' or 'going to the post office', [as] these places could be universal.

Hanna Slättne, dramaturg with Tinderbox Theatre Company that produced *All There Is*, worked with Bailie on the script. When I interviewed her, she told me that Troubles plays are a generational issue: playwrights whose adult lives spanned the Troubles reflected the concerns that affected them. Young and emerging playwrights – particularly those in their mid to late twenties, and thus who were young children when the 1994 ceasefires heralded the beginning of the stop-start peace process, tend to be, according to Slättne, 'very anti-politics, and therefore don't want to mention the Troubles'. Although a study of Northern Irish poetry and cinema is outwith the remit for this dissertation, there are similar trends here too. Michael Parker identified that recent poets show a 'distrust of grand narratives, an alertness to wider geopolitical concerns, and a preoccupation with domestic and family, rather than national history' (2007:225). John Brown (2006) echoes this in his introduction to an anthology of emerging Northern Irish poets. Meanwhile John Hill (2006) notes a similar trend in Northern Irish cinema.

Tinderbox staged a season of plays in 2010 under the group title of *True North*, dealing with issues such as homophobia, racism, dementia and the threat of redundancy. As Slättne notes:

The stories [in these plays] don't deny that they are living in a place where this dichotomy exists, but [the plays are] about the people who live within the history of negativity.

Slättne recalls a review of *True North*, broadcast on a BBC World Service programme: 'they called them post-post-Troubles plays. I think that was actually a

good way of looking at it'.<sup>46</sup> However, it is interesting that, yet again, the Troubles are still the reference point, albeit now twice removed. A key question here is who are the anticipated audiences? The World Service radio-listening audience is global. However, for theatre-going audiences, Slättne told me that plays about Belfast tend not to 'travel well' outside of Northern Ireland, thus the theatre in Belfast is primarily for a local audience. And, as theatre critic Jimmy Fay notes, 'audiences in Northern Ireland have long since grown tired of Troubles tropes on stage' (2014).<sup>47</sup>

Gareth Rubin's (2014) review in *The Observer* newspaper extols the Ulster Noir tradition, citing several fiction writers along with the then recent television series *The Fall* (screened on BBC 1 2014-2016). In this TV drama, an English police detective Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) pursues the noirishly-sounding serial killer Paul Spector (Jamie Dornan). But what is interesting here is *The Observer's* perpetuation of the stereotype of Belfast as mad, bad and dangerous, since the Troubles are seen as a root cause of the noir genre in the city. But the Troubles do not feature at all in *The Fall*, other than a photograph of murdered Royal Ulster Constabulary policemen in just one shot in the first series. Indeed, *The Fall* is quite notable for not falling prey to Belfast clichés. For example, in the first episode of series one, Gibson stops at the scene of a police investigation and asks the detective in charge if it is a bomb. He replies no, it is a drugs bust. This is surely an intentional thwarting of audience expectation. Serial killers exist in other cities so why should the Troubles be a root cause of Spector's problems? He kills to exercise domination over women and there is no suggestion that he was affected by the Troubles. The dénouement is that he was a victim of a particularly sadistic form of child abuse. *The Observer* article also refers to the then unpublished short story collection *Belfast Noir* as part of this Troubled tradition. However, for me, this collection is a particularly interesting example of the tension between the pull of the Troubles and the reality of contemporary Belfast.

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<sup>46</sup> Fionnula O'Connor reviewed the plays on *The Strand*, broadcast on BBC World Service on 9 October 2010 at 21.05 GMT. This is no longer available on BBC iPlayer.

<sup>47</sup> Online review, no page number.

### ***Belfast Noir: A Peace-full Trojan Horse?***

In English literature, the 'noir' genre refers to crime novels or thrillers characterised by 'violence, treachery and moral confusion' (Baldrick 2015). *Belfast Noir* (McKinty and Neville 2014) is part of an award-winning short story series, which began with *Brooklyn Noir* (McLoughlin 2004), where established and emerging writers who have a connection with a city publish new stories placed in that city. *Belfast Noir's* book jacket and contents reveal an interesting juxtaposition. The front cover is a black-and-white photograph of an unnamed Belfast street and the credit indicates it was taken in 1915, yet the short stories are all contemporary. But it is the promotional description on the back cover (taken from the book's introduction) that I am particularly taken by:

Few European cities have had as disturbed and violent a history as Belfast over the last half-century. For much of that time the Troubles (1968-1998) dominated life in Ireland's second-biggest population centre, and during the darkest days of the conflict, riots, bombings, and indiscriminate shootings were tragically commonplace. The British army patrolled the streets in armoured vehicles and civilians were searched for guns and explosives before they were allowed entry into the shopping district of the city centre... Belfast is still a city divided...

You can see Belfast's bloodstains up close and personal. This is the city that gave the world its worst ever maritime disaster, and turned it into a tourist attraction; similarly, we are perversely proud of our thousands of murders, our wounds constantly on display. You want noir? How about a painting the size of a house, a portrait of a man known to have murdered at least a dozen human beings in cold blood? Or a similar house-sized gable painting of a zombie marching across a postapocalyptic wasteland with an AK-47 over the legend UVF: Prepared for Peace – Ready for War. As Lee Child has said, Belfast is still "the most noir place on earth".

(McKinty & Neville 2014:back cover)

What struck me immediately on reading the back cover was that Belfast is described as *Ireland's* second biggest population centre, which indicates who the intended readership may be. The largest diaspora of Irish emigrants and their second, third, fourth generation etc. is in the United States, with 34.7 million people in the 2010 census citing Irish as their primary ethnicity (United States Census Bureau n.d.). Given Belfast's history, its literary stereotype, and the collection's noir remit, I was not surprised by heavily-trailed Troubles stories. But, somewhat unexpectedly, when I read the book only five out of the fourteen stories between the covers related directly to the Troubles or their aftermath, by which I include any references to armed combat, the ideology behind it, paramilitary activity, or references to Catholic and Protestant as opposing factions. For example, in Brian McGilloway's 'The Undertaking' (2014) a stash of guns is transported from Dundalk in the Republic of Ireland to a Belfast funeral parlour by funeral director Healy, somewhat reluctantly as he was pressured into it by paramilitary thugs. However, in an attempt to avoid police investigation, the coffin is inadvertently taken to the Roselawn crematorium in Belfast, where an assistant notes that there is a lot of ash, no bones, and pieces of metal inscribed with Glock, a gun manufacturer. By way of explanation Healy says, "'I wouldn't think of it as a cremation so much as a... decommissioning'" (McGilloway 2014:44, original ellipsis). This post-conflict story deals with transition and the clearing up of a difficult period in history. But only five Troubles stories out of fourteen is interesting when the book jacket promotes Belfast's violent past.

The best example of the nine non-Troubles stories is Lucy Caldwell's (2014) 'Poison'. A woman in her mid-thirties is alone in the bar of the Merchant Hotel in Belfast city centre when she recognises her former Spanish teacher sitting with a young girl half his age. She reflects back to when she was a school pupil and was obsessed by the handsome teacher, who wore his hair long, smoked Camel cigarettes, drove an Alpha Romeo and had married a former pupil. One day, when the school pupils, but not the teachers, had a day off, she walks to his house, meets his wife and inveigles herself in to use the bathroom, where she steals a bottle of perfume, the 'Poison' of the title. She then wears the perfume in her Spanish lessons. A few weeks later, she has a lift from the teacher and afterwards tells her

best friend they had sex. But she's lying. Although she admits this to her mother, the teacher is forced to resign and six months later his wife leaves him—'poison' taking on a different meaning.

What is interesting about this story is its complete lack of reference to all of those markers of Troubled Belfast, even the transitional post-Troubles markers seen in McGilloway's story. There is not a hint of paramilitary menace nor a single fluttering flag. 'Poison' does meet the noir criteria, since the violence is psychological, the treachery results in an innocent man losing his job, his wife and his reputation; and the moral confusion of an adolescent girl is particularly well written. It is placed in Belfast through named settings – the Merchant Hotel in the city centre, the walk she makes along Newtownards Road as she seeks out the teacher's house – but the story could be anywhere. This is Belfast portrayed as a provincial city, any provincial city, and not as Troubled Belfast, or even a post-Troubled city dealing with aftermath and reconciliation. But it is Belfast. It is a city with a non-Troubled identity.

So it appears that *Belfast Noir* is something of a peaceful Trojan Horse: Troubles stories are promised on the book jacket, a marketing ploy to encourage book-buying, and the shadowy black-and-white front cover photograph has a noir film feel about it, but in the stories themselves small 't' troubles are smuggled in, Belfast as it really is – another provincial city, not an exotic, violent, no-go 'town of shadows' (Hughes 1996:141). Belfast as it really is need not coincide with Belfast as a global literary Troubled trope, but I believe these writers are intentionally redefining Belfast as non-Troubled, maybe developing a new literary trope. Although I have explored other examples of Northern Irish writers that have left the Troubles behind, *Belfast Noir* interests me because the noir genre lends itself so easily to the Troubles yet many of the writers have made a deliberate choice not to do so.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered representations of Belfast primarily in published literature and demonstrated that there is a move away from depicting a Troubled city. This accords with the representations of life in the city of the research



participants I worked with. Stories on street corners, those told at Tenx9, stories relating to places in the city, and the stories told by a hairdresser were almost exclusively non-Troubled stories. However, fictional representations are linked to intended audience expectation, and in published fiction in particular there is still a commercial 'pull' towards a Troubled trope for an audience outwith Northern Ireland. This economic link can be seen in academia too. In the Introduction I discussed research funding and university summer school fees in Belfast, which are more easily obtainable to study a divided and contested city.

There is a change in the direction of Northern Irish literature but there is still some catching up to do. Glenn Patterson's (2014) novel, *The Rest Just Follows*, depicts the lives of a group of friends, starting when they meet at secondary school in 1974 and on up to the present time. When I spoke to Patterson at the book's launch I commented that it was good to see something written about contemporary Belfast and he said, with a laugh, 'Yes, we do eventually get to the present day', signing my copy of his book with the comment 'In the Here and Now!' However, Patterson's most recent novel *Gull* (2016) returns to the 1970s as he recounts the story of John DeLorean and his futuristic-looking car, which was manufactured in Northern Ireland. Eoin McNamee, another writer of Troubles novels (1994; 2004), reviews *Gull* in *The Irish Times*.

The Troubles are a malign anchor to a writer's ambition and craft and it takes guts to persevere. Art can founder under moral imperatives, but the best keep their nerve and their work draws increasing authority from it.

(McNamee 2016)<sup>48</sup>

This suggests there is a limiting factor to the voicing of Belfast in literature. When Patterson was asked at the 2016 Edinburgh Book Festival if he was writing anything about contemporary Belfast, he said he had no stories he felt compelled to

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<sup>48</sup> Online article, no page number.

tell in novels and was now focusing on screenplays.<sup>49</sup> Although I have identified a few novels that have moved away from the Troubles, it seems to be in short stories and in the theatre that this change is particularly reflected. The theatre-going audience in Belfast is a local one that is tired of the Troubles trope. The market for short stories is much smaller than for novels, as a glance at the shelves in any bookshop shows, so it may be that this encourages a bolder move away from Troubled Belfast as a brand. Recent short story collections by Sharon Owens (2014) and Jan Carson (2016) appear not to write of the Troubles, although I have not analysed them yet. However, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, novels and short stories are a reflection of local concerns but they also continue to play to the stereotype of Belfast that readers have come to expect, particularly with novels. It will be interesting to track which Northern Irish writers in the future have the nerve to move right away from the Troubles.

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<sup>49</sup> Patterson gave this response to a question from an audience member, 25 August 2016. Taken from contemporaneous notes made by thesis author during book reading and discussion.

## Chapter Seven

### CONCLUSION

Belfast has a real thirst for stories that aren't conflict driven, that aren't necessarily about Protestants and Catholics hating each other. You know what? Bollocks to this. I don't want to make jokes about Protestants and Catholics running in the shadow of each other, I don't want to be Seamus Heaney and write poetry about a foreign nation or whatever, I don't want to be asking to take a side. Actually, you know, I just want to hear someone tell a story and have a drink.

(Justin, Tenx9 storyteller)

In the Introduction, I assert that to understand city life anthropologically one needs to consider a spectrum of experience, but that academics writing on Belfast tend to privilege representations of the conflicted and divided city over the quotidian. This gives a distorted view of life lived there. As a discipline, anthropology is well placed to investigate the mundane and the particular of individuals' lives, and I argue that, for the individuals I worked with, their everyday lives are not dominated by the Troubles. My research identified that people's lives are expressed through their everyday existential dilemmas, what I refer to as small 't' troubles, and this dissertation puts those troubles, as well as people's joys, centre stage.

Because of the relative density of population in a city, a central feature of urban life is of fleeting encounters with *strangers* – passing the time of day at the bus stop or purchasing goods in a shop. And there are degrees of strangeness, as we gradually get to know someone. By and large, we learn to navigate these relationships with relative ease. Interaction with strangers is not only a way to access the everydayness of people's lives, but is also an aspect of sociality that is 'good to think with' (Amit 2015). In other words, the stranger here serves as both fieldwork method and analytical tool, since in these everyday encounters we present a *surface manifestation* of ourselves, performing the personae that we want others to perceive. What you encounter when you meet a stranger in the city is the immediate

and the present, but that does not mean it is trivial. What people choose to say and how they choose to say it is ‘a *deliberate* effort to represent, to say something about something’ (Peacock 1990:208, my emphasis). In calling upon the figure of the stranger I am contributing ‘a particular and ethnographically situated’ manifestation of sociality (Long and Moore 2014:8). By paying attention to quotidian exchanges *in Belfast*, to the everydayness of transitory and superficial encounters there, we can access something of the everydayness of life in *that* city.

How I represent Belfast in this dissertation has presented me with a dilemma. If my thesis is that quotidian life is dominated by Not-the-Troubles should I write about the Troubles at all, particularly as I accuse others of doing this rather too well? But, by setting up an argument in opposition to something I have to explain what I am opposing. Some quotidian discourses in Belfast *will* still be Troubled. For those living at the interface between Catholic and Protestant populations in north Belfast, say, even if they eschew those divisions there are daily reminders of their presence, and at times this erupts into discord or violence. But my work seeks to place Troubled narratives at the margins in order to make a space for other voices, other stories; to respond to Justin’s plea in the opening quote. In this Conclusion, therefore, I seek to answer three questions:

1. What have I come to know and how have I come to know it  
(‘Epistemological Content’, ‘Methods and Analysis’)?
2. How have I represented the data and what implication does this have  
(‘Aesthetics of Presentation’)?
3. In what way does my research contribute to urban anthropology in  
Northern Ireland (‘Anthropology and The City’)?

### **Epistemological Content**

The key thesis of this dissertation is that everyday life in Belfast is not-Troubled and I draw on the figure of the stranger and the metaphor of surfaces to deduce this. Goffman (1990) says that what we present to others is a facet of ourselves, a mask – that is, our surface – and that we signal our (un)willingness to engage with others through glances. But Schieffelin asserts that when we do come into the presence of

others, we do so expressively, through verbal and non-verbal communication that creates 'an atmosphere of trust and a sense of mutual expectations' (Schieffelin 1998:195). This suggests that we interact with people at face value. For example, if we engage in a short conversation with someone on the street, our outward appearance to one another may be of polite acceptance, despite what our thoughts about that person may be: what Goffman refers to as 'impression management' (1990:203). This does not necessarily mean that we consciously seek to hide ourselves or manipulate others (although this could be the case). Humans are complex beings and one could not present the fullness of that complexity in a short interaction. However, I argue that we *can* learn something from these surfaces. Through people's everyday conversations we can glean something of the everydayness of their lives, what may be mundane or banal but is, nevertheless, part of the human condition.

We see [other human beings] simply as faces in a crowd, as an anonymous mass, until we enter into dialogue with them. Forthwith a stranger suddenly possesses a voice, a history, a name – and what transpires between us may change our lives forever.

(Jackson 2013:xiv)

What transpired between strangers and me in Belfast were *storied* conversations. Storytelling is an essential feature of how we communicate (Barthes 1993; Kearney 2006). Even if conversations are short they can still be storied. For example, Torridon and I were walking down Fountain Street in the city centre when a man approached us. He held out his hand towards Torridon and looked at me; a non-verbal request to stroke her. I smiled and nodded. He spoke.

'She's a lovely dog. How old is she?'

'Eighteen months' I replied. 'Do you have a dog?'

'Dog. Dead.'

He was wearing sunglasses but the lenses were not very dark and I could see his eyes welling up with tears.

'I'm so sorry. What kind of dog?'

‘Westie.’

He was struggling to speak but stroking Torridon all the time.

‘They’re such good companions aren’t they?’ I said.

‘Yes.’

We stood together in silence for another minute or so while he continued stroking Torridon. Then we said goodbye and went our separate ways. It was a very sad encounter.

This conversation only lasted a few minutes and he was a man of few words, but his words and gestures told a painful story of love and bereavement. For Bruner, stories are ‘rooted in society’ and ‘performed by individuals in cultural settings’ (1984:5). Through the stories I gathered in Belfast I conclude that everyday life there has small ‘t’ troubles, such as the death of a dear companion, but is not dominated by capital ‘T’ Troubles.

Although cities are acknowledged as ‘gatherings of strangers’ (Amin 2012:1) where these relationships are negotiated with relative ease (Harman 1988), one could challenge my argument on the surface presentation of Not-the-Troubles because of the ubiquity in Northern Ireland of what is known as ‘telling’ (Burton 1978). This is another form of ‘storying’, where people read covert cues and make assumptions about what may lie beneath the surface. Religious, national and/or political affiliations are assumed through surface signs that may not be made deliberately explicit, such as where people live, what sports they pursue or how they pronounce certain words. One cannot presume that this information is then viewed as negative, positive or neutral, but even for people who actively eschew the notion that these differences should matter, telling is so ubiquitous that such categorisation continues, as with Horatio who ‘still clocks a Catholic name’ when he hears one. Telling establishes the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. Therefore, it may not be deemed appropriate to tell Troubled stories on street corners. To test my argument I needed to delve deeper, to different degrees of strangeness.

Thus, I asked many people with whom I had varying levels of acquaintanceship to tell me stories relating to particular places in the city, and I used stories from Gareth, Sam and Geraldine to illustrate my argument. Here the Troubles did appear through Sam’s interest in conflict architecture, whereas Gareth’s and

Geraldine's stories were not-Troubled. But one could counter that these people knew of my interest in quotidian, un-Troubled stories and that skewed what they chose to tell me. Therefore, I turned to Tenx9, the public storytelling night where a vast array of everyday stories is told, and to a dramatic interaction with a hairdresser, whose concerns were of child abuse and immigration. My argument for a quotidian non-Troubled Belfast rests on the *totality* and *quantity* of all these stories. Only a small number have been included in my dissertation, but they are *typical* of all the stories I heard.

I also analyse representations of Belfast in fictional literature to consider if they reflect the range of stories I refer to above. Although in the last five years or so some authors are moving away from a Troubled trope to one where the past conflict and its aftermath are either faint background colouration or are not referred to at all, the dark and dangerous city is a strong 'brand' that acts as a limiting factor to voicing Belfast. I conclude here that Troubled or non-Troubled representations are closely linked to intended audience: novels aimed at a readership outwith Northern Ireland are more likely to sell if they conform to a stereotype of Belfast as a conflicted city. I draw an intended-audience parallel with academia, where research funding and overseas student fees for a summer school are more readily available for a Troubled city than they are for a mundane and banal one. These representations of Belfast in fictional and academic literature are for an international audience that has come to expect the city to be written in terms of its past.

Performance is written into the politics and sociality of the city. Paying attention to performance reveals what people feel is important to communicate. And non-Troubled stories abound in Belfast. This is despite performative reminders of the conflict, such as murals, flags or parades. It is despite the difficulty in re-establishing devolved government after the 2017 election because 'the legacy of Northern Ireland's Troubles is again one of the biggest issues facing the parties' (McDowell 2017).<sup>50</sup> People mediate social relations such that they transcend narratives of conflict or that alternative narratives of the city are found in the interstices of conflict and sectarianism. These are not mutually exclusive positions, of

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<sup>50</sup> Online news report, no page number.

course. I am not suggesting here that the Troubles and their legacy are unimportant to people.

There is not one city of Belfast, but as many cities as people make within it. In their book, *The Cities of Belfast*, editors Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly call for a challenge to stereotypical images that 'inflict a representational harm on the city' by presenting aspects of Belfast as 'sites of possibility in Irish culture' (2003:7-8). They offer a series of essays on, among other things, architecture, art, poetry, fiction and photography. Yet even here the Troubles are not laid to rest. The cover photograph is of a large stack of pallets with touches of red, white and blue paint: a bonfire in-the-making to celebrate the 1690 victory of Protestant William of Orange over Catholic James II. Meanwhile, Aaron Kelly's (2003) essay in the collection aims to resurrect Eoin McNamee's (1994) novel *Resurrection Man* out of the 'Troubles trash' genre by examining how this Catholic writer explores loyalist violence and how he subverts the tribal cartography of Belfast. I suggest, however, that whether one is persuaded by Kelly's argument or not, merely writing about such a Troubled novel plays into, rather than challenges, a stereotypical image of Belfast.

## **Methods and Analysis**

I also argue that the complexity, size and anonymity of the city means that the anthropologist has to find different ways of reaching people; thus more methods are better than one: 'methodological flexibility' is required in an urban context (Hannerz 1980:310). Under the general umbrella of participant observation I specifically employed methods of walking, performance, my body as a research subject, and using fictional literature as ethnographic data. My interactions with people fell within a continuum of casual exchanges through stories to semi-structured interviews.

These methods weave through the dissertation because method, data and knowledge are closely interwoven. My choice of method influences my findings; my analytical choices highlight *what I think is important*. For example, performance in anthropology is understood in two ways: as the processes by which human beings 'articulate their purposes, situations and relationships in everyday social life', and as



an aesthetic staging of a play or dance, where the actors conjure up an imagined world for the audience to appreciate (Schieffelin 1998:195). I call on both of these, employing performance as method and analytic tool. I am interested in surfaces and what we present to strangers. As Susanna Rostas notes, performance in everyday life 'often has the sense of putting more into something (in a self-conscious or intentional way) than is absolutely necessary; of loading an act with meaning' such that it is 'creative' and 'gives an enactment its zest' (1998:90).

Rostas gives washing dishes as an example, which is often done habitually and without conscious thought. But if this is done more dramatically than is strictly necessary, with expansive movements or expressing emotions such as anger or amusement, then it becomes a performance. There was certainly a lot of zest to Josie the hairdresser's performance. The expansive movements and expressions of emotion that accompanied her story were not what I expected while she was cutting my hair. But had she told her stories without cutting my hair, it may not have been quite so expressively told. As an observer to this interaction with Josie, I believe it was her wild gesticulations with the scissors and the presence of the mirror that contributed to her performance. This led me to a theatrical analysis. Meanwhile, my subjective participation in, and visceral response to, Josie's performance encouraged me to turn this into an 'autoethnographic' exercise. This term has several meanings (Reed-Danahay 1997), but I apply it here to observing and analysing the responses of my own body; that is, using my subject body as a research tool. This focused on the knowledge I gained *in the moment* through all of my senses. Although this analysis gave me a sense of how Josie may have felt when she first heard the social worker's story, my analysis shed most light on my self-awareness, and my own performance, as a researcher. Indeed, Wolcott goes so far as to say that 'fieldwork itself might be viewed as a performing art' (Wolcott 2005:75).

The interweaving of method and analysis was most evident when I gave a seminar at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), since here I moved from 'performance analogy to actual performance' (Hughes-Freeland 1998:3) in my re-enacted meeting with Josie. Performance as method – by which I mean my representation of ethnographic data and the intention to stimulate emotional responses in the audience – also acted as a framing device. It may be argued that by

beginning with a theatrical performance, the theatrical analysis that followed was more acceptable. An earlier (discarded) version of that particular chapter focused on the content of what Josie said, analysing it in the context of how immigration in Northern Ireland is spoken of in public discourse. This portrayed Josie in a very different light (something I discussed in the RAI paper). This leads me to consider how I have chosen to represent the data in this dissertation.

### **Aesthetics Of Presentation**

I consider the aesthetics of presentation here in two ways: what data I have chosen for analysis and how it is written up. I have focused on small 't' troubles and argue that this constitutes everyday lives for the people I met and worked with. But the ubiquity of everydayness is not accurately reflected in academic studies of Northern Ireland. For example, Bairner suggests that the *flâneur* in Belfast:

hears sectarian innuendo in everyday speech and sees the numerous casual ways in which people declare their sectarianised identities to the outside world and, above all, to the 'other sort'.

(Bairner 2006:133)

I too overheard occasional sectarian comments. For example, from the railway bridge by Windsor Park football stadium you can see into the home ground of Linfield Football Club, where 'both club and ground are synonymous with Protestant identity' (Bairner and Shirlow 1998:165). One day, as I walked over the bridge, I saw that Linfield were playing Cliftonville, a team from North Belfast that has a Catholic following (Bairner and Shirlow 1998). Walking towards me was a young girl – she looked about eight years old – accompanied by two women. As the girl passed me I overheard her comment on the small number of Cliftonville supporters, who were clustered in the upper tier of the North Stand. She said, 'there's not many on the Fenian side'. 'Fenian' is a derogatory term for a Catholic. This comment went completely unremarked by the two women walking with her but sounded quite stark to my ears. It stood out because I *rarely* heard sectarian comments during my many

walks around the city. I do not know if Alan Bairner hails from Northern Ireland or not but he was Professor of Sports Studies for twenty-five years at Ulster University. He probably has different, insider access to people in Belfast and may be in a better position than I am to discern these sectarian comments. However, I contend if that Bairner is *looking* for sectarian innuendo he may well find it, just as I may have done if I was focusing on the Troubles. Un-Troubled versions of city life are all around yet they are grossly under-reported in academic study.

Turning now to writing up, Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle (2007) identify that ethnographic knowledge is:

the product of multiple cross-cutting conversations across diverse contexts, not only between anthropologists and informants but also between anthropologist and others in the academy and more broadly 'at home'.

(Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007:141)

Referring to the book *Birds of My Kalam Country* by Ian Saem Majnep and Ralph Bulmer (1977), they highlight that these authors denote their different voices and viewpoints through differences in font and writing style. This not only positions each author in the text but also highlights the collaborative nature of knowledge production. Thus, I will now consider my writing style and how I collaborated with research participants in producing the text.

Because storytelling plays a central role in this dissertation I have intentionally used different literary techniques. For example, I began with a prologue that could be termed creative non-fiction; this is writing about real people, events and places and using 'a careful and skilled application of literary techniques' (Moore 2007:3). There is clearly a resonance here with Geertz's *faction* (1988), but with more emphasis on the literariness of the text. In the prologue I hint at the content of the forthcoming ethnographic chapters without being too literal, despite suggestions from others that I explain exactly what I mean by, say, the 'North Stand'. However, I resisted describing it as 'one of the stands of Linfield Football Club'. Instead, I indicated its function by describing the sounds that accompanied it on match days –

‘football fans stomping on the stands’, ‘chants and cheers’, and ‘piercing referee’s whistle’, and I intentionally used alliteration and rhyme in the sentence. I wanted this prologue to engage the reader’s imagination through sensory, descriptive writing and to leave questions unanswered so that, hopefully, the reader wants to find the answers in the dissertation. As Kirin Narayan advises, in a good story ‘what’s omitted, or withheld, may be as significant as what’s included’ (2012:13). Sometimes I used dialogue to give a sense of immediacy and ‘present-ness’ to my writing, to give the reader a sense of being there. I also used description give a sense of place. These techniques contrast with the academic writing style I use when analysing data.

Here I need to establish my academic credentials by establishing and defending a theoretical argument, appropriately placing it within relevant academic debate. However, when considering performance I found both academic and creative writing to be inadequate to the task of data representation. While writing about Josie the hairdresser I struggled to convey, to my satisfaction, the multisensorial nature of the encounter. It was only when I actually performed the ethnographic data myself that I felt I came closer to truthful representation. Non-verbal movements and emotions were an integral part of Josie’s performance and I needed to re-enact them, and the audience needed to have an emotional reaction to my performance, to give a fuller picture of what transpired between Josie and me. Performance is about ‘liveness’ (Auslander 2008). As Schieffelin says, it is the *performativity* of performance that sets it apart, its immediate and ephemeral nature; this is not a quality of texts, which are ‘changeless and enduring’ (1998:198-199). I also found it difficult to recreate the humour of the many funny stories told at Tenx9, since this often rested on words and actions performed together, such as a deadpan delivery followed by a raised eyebrow indicating ironic intention.

My writing in this dissertation is for more than one intended audience. Primarily it is for my examiners, but I have also shared relevant sections with some of the research participants (one of whom has read and commented on all the chapters). I wanted them to see and to sanction the way I portrayed their stories and their city, and to give them an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings. Significantly, I have not done this with Josie. My analysis of her story developed over many months as I was writing up. I want to meet with her again in person, to explain

my work in more detail, before sharing my writing with her, and this has not been possible as yet.<sup>51</sup> Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria de la Cruz Hernandez note that, 'ethnography is made by anthropologists and informants, and should be owned by both' (2012:1). Josie's story *as I have presented it*, is not (necessarily) owned by both of us. I did not work with research participants as collaboratively as Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz Hernandez worked together. My point here is that my writing is for a non-academic audience too.

Wulff (2016) explores differences in her own writing style through a journalistic essay she wrote for a non-academic audience, which included her research participants. I wrote a blog (on the dog) during my fieldwork that used an informal style intended to stimulate interest in my publication about Torridon (Lane 2015c). Different writing styles enable us to engage differently with the data. For example, it is much easier to use academic writing to be critical of another academic (since critique is part of academic discourse) than it is to be critical of a research participant with whom you intend to share your work. In Chapter Five I give the example of novelist/Professor Christopher Marsh. As author, he illustrates some of the absurdity of life in Northern Ireland, as observed by an outsider, through highly stylised literary devices. This technique would be a more difficult proposition in his role as an academic.

In representing my data I have also used photographs as documentary evidence. Thus, one must ask why choose these pictures (Barthes 2000) and what do they add to the dissertation? Some photographs are there to support the text, such as the image of Nellie, my next-door neighbour, with Torridon (page 44). At other times they provide a 'more complex, perhaps more eloquent' illustration of the story they accompany (Sutherland 2016:38). The photograph of Torridon affectionately greeting a woman on St Patrick's Day (see page 56) illustrates a vitality in that encounter that is difficult to describe in words. I also use photographs to elicit particular ideas, such as the series of images of the shipyard cranes in Chapter Four. These are photographed, and therefore viewed, from a variety of perspectives – a derelict wasteland, behind the Titanic museum, with Gareth and his LGBT

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<sup>51</sup> This is a project I am keen to follow up.

photograph. This underpins that there are a variety of viewpoints on the symbolic meaning of the cranes. Finally, the photograph of Castle Court shopping mall (page 146), which shows a reflection of the building opposite, acts a provocation for me to muse on temporality, the juxtaposition of images, and of images and text.

## **Anthropology And The City**

[E]thnographic knowledge is unimportant unless it is relevant for a specific someone, usually a cluster of academics or students thinking about related issues.

(Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007:191)

I wish to draw my dissertation to a close with a brief consideration of what contribution my research has made to urban anthropology of Northern Ireland. Ulf Hannerz asks whether ethnographic contributions to urban studies constitute an ‘anthropology of the city, or only *in* the city’ (Hannerz 1980:248, my emphasis). My ethnography is firmly placed *in* the city. I work with a selection of individuals and, although I generalise to the extent that I argue for a non-Troubled quotidian, I accept that this may not represent the lives of everyone. These are ‘portraits of lifestyles’, although this individual focus does not necessarily mean that the city ‘recedes into the background’ (Hannerz 1980:297). These are portraits of city dwellers and I have sought to give a sense of their city through description.

But to study the city as a whole, one would have to take account of all the individuals, all of the activities, all of the built environment and other non-human elements – the rats in the sewers, the urban foxes scavenging in bins. This would be too big a project. Hannerz suggests there may be a trade-off between extensive and intensive coverage, but then any compromise cannot be an anthropology of the *total* city. In addition, the use of the definite article, as in *the* city, would need to encompass a huge range of urban environments – from megacity Tokyo to tiny Vatican City. Urban studies, by its very nature, calls for an interdisciplinary approach (Ramadier 2004). Therefore, a ‘total’ view of the city is possible by drawing on, or critiquing, these different disciplinary contributions. Urban anthropology of Northern

Ireland, and of Belfast in particular, is overwhelmingly focused on the life of citizens within the context of the Troubles. My contribution here is to challenge the representation (but not necessarily the theses) that these authors offer by arguing that the totality of this academic writing gives a distorted view of life in Belfast.

Raban suggests that the city is soft, it 'awaits the imprint of an identity' and shapes us by 'the resistance [it offers] when we try to impose our own personal form' on it (1975:9-10). My dissertation illustrates the imprint that some individuals make on Belfast, such as how queer visibility is expressed, and how people offer their own personal resistance to Troubled narratives, such as the stories told at Tenx9. One needs the specific context of Belfast, sometimes, to understand how people make meaning, as in Gareth's photograph of the gantry cranes at the Harland and Wolff shipyard.

Belfast is often portrayed in academic literature as a divided or contested city (Low 2005) but the vast array of stories I heard from individuals living in Belfast were primarily non-Troubled renditions of the city. Indeed, in Chapter Three Roisin described her move from County Tyrone to Belfast in the 1970s (an especially violent time during the conflict) as a move to a life of freedom and anonymity. As she put it, 'I embraced Belfast with all my teenage desire to be known for myself'. Yes, there were bombs and bag searches; 'I have no idea how I survived but it was wonderful, crazy and I made tons of friends. It was just huge and different and wonderful, colourful.' This particular quality of the urban, as a site of personal freedom, was identified by Robert Park (1915) but I have not seen this reflected in academic analyses of Belfast, certainly not written during or about the Troubles. This is a representation of lives in Belfast missing from the literature. I therefore position my work as an original contribution to the anthropology of Northern Ireland because it is a counter-balance to the majority of academic depictions of urban life in Belfast.

But what of anthropological urban study beyond Northern Ireland? When Belfast is analysed in comparative terms, it is often discussed alongside other contested cities, such as Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia (Calame & Charlesworth 2009) or Johannesburg (Bollens 1999). Do anthropological analyses in these cities privilege conflict over the quotidian? I end with a proposal: methods such as walking the dog and engagement with strangers could be employed elsewhere. Not-the-Troubles narratives may not be exclusive to Belfast.



**Figure 28 Torridon, Strangers and the City**



## EPILOGUE

*Leave-taking. Extract from fieldnote, 19 September 2014.*

Torridon was at day-care all day, so when I took her for a walk early evening she was tired and we didn't go far. As we neared home we saw Angela, who called out 'Hello Torrida!' [mispronouncing Torridon's name] as she usually does. When we caught up with each other – Torridon and me ambling, Angela running – she stroked Torridon, although the dog wasn't as effusive as she usually is. I told Angela we would be moving away soon.

'Why?'

'We're going home to London. That's where we normally live. We're only here for a short time.'

'Are you on holiday here?'

'Yes. It was long holiday, but only a holiday.'

At this news she threw her arms round my waist (she only comes up that far) and hugged me hard.

'I love you,' she said.

'And I love you too Angela.'

I felt very self-conscious saying this – not because it wasn't true, because in a way I do. She is a delightful child and I enjoy being in her company, but I thought, what if people overhear me? Will they misconstrue it? Angela then threw her arms around Torridon's neck.

'I love you too, Torrida.'

As she walked back up to the house with us, I told her she'd see Torridon again before we go.

'Will you come back?'

This needed an instantaneous response. Should I be kind or should I be truthful? Do I say it is most unlikely that Torridon will be back even if I am at some time in the future? She's five years old. It's like the Santa Claus question.

'Yes, we'll come back.'

As we walked into the house she watched us go in and waved. She always does this, but this time there was no smile on her face. It was the hardest goodbye.

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